

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY



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THE ASSIGNMENT

The Council requested this study to understand how County-funded alternative education programs support youths' successful transitions to adulthood, particularly among at-risk youth. OLO found that the County offers a number of alternative education programs aimed at dropout prevention and recovery. For the most part, these programs align with best practices that stress the importance of rigorous and relevant curricula and fostering relationships to keep students motivated to succeed in high school. However, some program gaps exist, particularly related to access to career and occupational training and program supports for students at highest risk for dropping out.

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION?

The term 'alternative education' refers to programs serving at-risk youth who are no longer in traditional schools. These programs can include dropout prevention and recovery programs and schools with specialized curriculums in career and technical education. The National Dropout Prevention Center identifies six sets of approaches.

- Summer and evening schools that enable students to earn academic credits;
- Separate alternative schools with a special curriculum (e.g., parenting or job skills);
- Alternative classrooms within a traditional school;
- Continuation schools for students no longer attending traditional schools;
- Second chance schools for students at highest risk of being expelled or incarcerated; and
- Residential schools for special case students.

Common elements of alternative education programs include small class sizes, individualized learning experiences, flexible scheduling, mentoring, and case management.

THE DEMAND FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County. Nor have any of the County-funded agencies evaluated the effectiveness of their alternative education programs to increase high school completion rates or to prepare youth for colleges and careers. About 1,200 high school students drop out of MCPS each year, representing 2.5% of total high school enrollment. This district-wide average masks differences by student group. Students who are male, Latino, black, learning English as a second language, low income, or have a disability drop out at rates that are 50% to 500% higher than their counterparts.

Students leave school due to complex interactions of individual, school, and family factors that lead to disengagement and eventual dropout. In 2009, four of every five students who dropped out of MCPS reported they left school because they were failing or bored. The personal costs of dropping out can include lower earnings and employment; the societal costs include a reduced tax base and higher social service costs. Yet, no federal, state, or local agency has sole responsibility for reconnecting youth to educational options that lead to a high school diploma or equivalent.

BEST PRACTICES IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The research literature on student engagement identifies three best practices for motivating students in high school:

- Enhance the **rigor** of the curriculum by coupling high standards and expectations for student success with high levels of support to enable all students to succeed;
- Enhance the **relevance** of school by ensuring that curriculum and instruction respond to and reflect students' current interests and long-term goals; and
- Foster **relationships** to motivate students to succeed by connecting students to their schools and communities.

OLO’s review of the research literature indicates that best practices in alternative education, dropout prevention, and career and technical education align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework for engaging high school students. The table below summarizes these practices.

Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Framework to Engage Students

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Examples of Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality instruction • High expectations for students
	Extensive supports that enable students to meet high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective classroom management • Social skills instruction • Summer school and tutoring
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice for students • Active, hands on learning • Flexibility
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on career and college readiness • Career and technical education • Service learning/internships • AP/IB/early college experiences
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized instruction • Small schools and class sizes • Mentors
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Collaboration with other agencies
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council, 2003		

LESSONS FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES – MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION

In some communities, alternative education programs are part of a comprehensive service delivery framework known as “multiple pathways to graduation” aimed at reducing dropout rates, improving graduation rates, and structuring services for at-risk youth. This approach consists of a continuum of programs for re-connecting youth to education and employment. Towards these ends this approach typically includes two key components:

- An **education component** that expands educational program offerings to reach at-risk youth through: (1) the use of adequate “on ramps” or re-entry points for youth who detour from the traditional path; (2) customized services to address the challenges that can detour students; and (3) a mix of schools and programs that responds to the educational needs of disconnected youth.
- An **occupational component** to ensure gainful employment or access to career training for at-risk youth. Examples of this component include career academies, intensive career exploration programs, and high school reform models that emphasize career and technical education.

LOCAL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In FY11, three County agencies provided fourteen alternative education dropout prevention and recovery programs. Together, they served more than 14,000 youth at a cost of about \$28 million. (See page iii.)

The County current allocates more than 90% of its alternative education resources for dropout prevention. In FY11:

- Eight **dropout prevention programs**, administered by MCPS, served 13,000 youth at a cost of nearly \$26 million.
- Six **dropout recovery programs**, administered by Montgomery College and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), served 861 youth at a cost of about \$2.5 million. Enrollment in dropout recovery programs equaled about 70% of the number of youths that drop out from MCPS annually.

MCPS Alternative Education Programs Focused on Dropout Prevention

MCPS Programs	Program Descriptions	Enrollment	FY11 Budget
Alternative I Programs	Services for students with academic, attendance, or behavioral challenges	1,664	\$3,257,000
Alternative II and III Programs	Schools for students requiring additional alternative services or in lieu of suspension	450	\$5,042,000
Regional Institute for Children & Adolescents*	Special education school primarily serving students with emotional disabilities	152	\$3,326,000
High School Plus**	Credit recovery classes during school day	4,390	\$502,000
Summer School**	New and recovery credit classes in summer	5,911	\$1,829,000
Online Pathway to Graduation**	Opportunity for current and former students to earn up to 3 credits online for graduation	129	\$75,000
Vocational Education in Special Education	Pre-vocational training for certificate-bound students with disabilities	583	\$11,427,000
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	Vocational and academic program for ESOL Spanish-speaking high school students	30	\$267,000
Total		13,309	\$25,725,000

* MCPS share of funding; ** FY12 Data

DHHS and Montgomery College Alternative Education Programs Focused on Dropout Recovery

County-Funded Programs	Program Descriptions	Enrollment	FY11 Budget
Gateway to College (Montgomery College)	Dropouts and current students can earn high school and college credit simultaneously toward diploma and associate's degree	141	\$925,000
GED Program at Montgomery College	Placement testing, GED preparation classes, GED testing and post secondary support	127	\$49,000
Conservation Corps (DHHS)	Job training, stipend, and GED preparation	19	\$400,000
Crossroads and Upcounty Opportunity Centers (DHHS)	Variety of services for at-risk youth including dropout prevention and recovery	409	\$952,000
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (DHHS)	GED preparation and job readiness programming for at-risk Latino youth	165	\$133,000
Total		861	\$2,460,000

RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION ISSUES

To facilitate a discussion on the best use of County resources to support successful youth transitions into adulthood, OLO recommends the Council convene an Education Committee worksession with representatives of MCPS, Montgomery College, DHHS, and the Department of Economic Development to discuss the following issues.

1. What is known about the demand for alternative education programs in the County and the extent to which County programs meet that demand?

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County. To address this data gap and compare the demand for local alternative education programs with the County's supply, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to describe:

- How many youth in Montgomery County (ages 16-24) are not on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and how many of these youth are served in local programs?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve its graduation rate(s)? What measures does MCPS use to identify secondary students as off-track to graduate?

2. What role should occupational training play in current County efforts to engage youth?

Best practices in alternative education recognize the vital role that occupational training can play to engage youth and prepare them for college and careers. To discern the role of occupational training among the County's alternative education programs, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to describe:

- What should be the occupational component of each agency's alternative education programs?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the career and technical education component of existing alternative education programs?

3. What role can the private sector play to bolster local youth workforce development?

Active private sector participation in advising and supporting local career and technical education programs are also recognized as best practices for engaging youth. To explore opportunities to booster private sector support for youth occupational training, OLO recommends the Council ask representatives of County agencies and business organizations to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to enhance private sector involvement in County agency career and technical education and youth workforce development efforts?
- From the perspectives of the County agencies and the private sector, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering together to advance youth workforce development opportunities?

4. What should be the role of Thomas Edison High School of Technology in expanding occupational training opportunities for youth?

Edison offers a number of programs not available on other MCPS campuses, yet suffers from under enrollment. To address Edison's under enrollment and explore options for expanding its outreach to at-risk youth, OLO recommends the Council ask MCPS representatives to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to more youth in the County, including students who are performing below grade level (e.g., behind in academic credits)?
- Which Edison programs hold the most promise for re-engaging at-risk youth and dropouts?
- Has MCPS leadership considered converting Edison into a comprehensive high school to serve high school students earlier in their careers (i.e., 9th and 10th grade)?

For a complete copy of OLO-Report 2012-4, go to: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo

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Chapter I: Authority, Scope, and Organization of Report

A. Authority

Council Resolution 17-211, *Fiscal Year 2012 Work Program for Office of Legislative Oversight*, adopted July 19, 2011.

B. Background

The term ‘alternative education’ often refers to programs serving vulnerable youth who are no longer in traditional schools. Such youth can be in school as struggling learners or out of school as high-school aged dropouts. This definition of alternative education is the one used by the National Center on Educational Statistics and also the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University that has identified six sets of alternative education approaches.¹

- Summer and evening schools that enable students to earn academic credits;
- Separate alternative schools with a special curriculum (e.g., parenting or job skills);
- Alternative classrooms within a traditional school;
- Continuation schools for students no longer attending traditional schools;
- Second chance schools for students at highest risk of being expelled or incarcerated; and
- Residential schools for special case students, usually placed by the courts or the family.

With the exception of continuation schools, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) provides programming that aligns with each of these alternative education descriptions – credit recovery programs, a CTE high school (i.e., Thomas Edison), alternative classes, second chance schools, and a residential school co-managed with the State of Maryland. MCPS, however, only classifies two of these offerings as “alternative programs:” alternative classes within middle and high schools for students with academic, behavioral, or social difficulties (i.e., Alternative I programs); and second chance schools for students who have been unsuccessful in alternative classes (Alternative II programs) or could have been expelled from the school system (Alternative III programs).

C. Purpose and Scope

This report responds to County Council questions about how alternative education programs in Montgomery County meet the needs of students at-risk of dropping out of school. Specifically, the Council asked OLO to describe:

- The County’s array of alternative education services and programs to improve graduation rates for its at-risk students;
- MCPS’ use of career and technical education programs to serve students at-risk of dropping out of school; and
- How County programs and approaches align with the research about evidenced-based best practices.

¹ See NCES Report 2010-026 stating that students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school).

Given the Council's interest in alternative education programs serving students at-risk beyond MCPS' current Alternative I, II, and III programs, this project provides a broad overview of the portfolio of alternative education programs available in Montgomery County to also include career and technical education and dropout prevention and recovery programs and services administered by other County funded agencies.

D. Organization of Report

Chapter II, The Imperative for Alternative Education, describes the need for alternative education programs by describing dropout and school completion trends in Montgomery County, the consequences for dropping out and the risk factors associated with dropping out.

Chapter III, The Policy Context for Alternative Education, describes the roles that federal, state, and local governments can play to support alternative education and re-connect youth to education and the workplace.

Chapter IV, Alternative Education Programs in Montgomery County, describes MCPS' Alternative I, II, and III programs, other MCPS programs focused on dropout prevention, including credit-recovery programs and RICA, the school systems' career and technical education programs, and other County funded dropout prevention and recovery programs and services.

Chapter V, Best Practices in Alternative Education, synthesizes the research on best practices for alternative education, dropout prevention, dropout recovery and career and technical education programs serving at-risk youth.

Chapter VI, Lessons from Multiple Pathways to Graduation Efforts, describes strategies used in other jurisdictions aimed at re-connecting at-risk youth to education and the workplace.

Chapters VII and VIII presents the Office of Legislative Oversight's **Findings and Recommended Discussion Issues**.

Chapter IX, Agency Comments, contains comments on the final draft of this report from Montgomery County Public Schools.

E. Methodology

Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) staff members Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Sue Richards, and Jennifer Renkema conducted this study, with assistance from Aron Trombka. OLO gathered information through document reviews, data requests, and interviews with staff from MCPS, Montgomery College, and the Montgomery Department of Health and Human Services. OLO also visited five MCPS school sites, including the Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents and conducted focus groups with school and central-office based MCPS staff.

F. Acknowledgements

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Chapter II: The Imperative for Alternative Education

Researchers and educators recognize that a “one size fits all” approach to delivering instruction will not meet the needs of every student. Whether one attributes the lack of fit to the limitations of the traditional school system or to the factors that place students at-risk for dropping out, some students will require additional support, sometimes in different settings, to graduate from high school.¹

This chapter describes the imperative for alternative education by describing the need for alternative education programs in Montgomery County to increase student engagement and graduation rates. It is presented in three parts:

- A. Dropout and Graduation in Montgomery County**, describes trends in dropout and graduation rates for MCPS students from FY06 to FY10;
- B. The Cost of Dropping Out**, describes the consequences of dropping out of school for both individuals and communities; and
- C. Student and School Risk Factors for Dropping Out**, describes factors that impact student dropout rates and reasons given by MCPS students for dropping out.

The following findings emerge from the information and data reviewed in this chapter:

- From FY06 to FY10, about 1,200 students dropped out of MCPS annually (for a five-year total of 6,000 students), reflecting about 2.5% of MCPS’ high school enrollment.
- Dropout rates were almost 50% higher for males than females (2.9% vs. 2.0%) and three to five times higher for Latino and black students compared to Asian or white students (3.4%-4.9% vs. 0.9-1.3%). Rates were also higher for English language learners (4.9%), students receiving free and reduced priced meals (3.5%), and students with disabilities (2.9%) compared to all students.
- The average dropout rate for comprehensive high schools varied from 0.4% at Winston Churchill High School to 4.6% at Wheaton High Schools.
- MCPS’ alternative high school programs for students at greatest risk of dropping out evidenced the highest dropout rates, ranging from 5.1% and 31.8% annually.
- Using a cohort measure, 86% of MCPS’ Class of 2010 graduated within four years.² More than 90% of Asian and white students met this benchmark compared to 74% of Latino students and 78% of black students. Further, only 52% of English language learners, 60% of students with disabilities, and 73% of students receiving FARMS graduated within four years.
- The individual costs of dropping out include lower earnings and labor market participation and the societal costs include a reduced tax base and increased tax burden for social services.
- Students leave school due to complex interactions of individual, school, and family factors that lead to disengagement and eventual dropout. In FY09, nearly 80% of students dropping out of MCPS reported leaving school due to failing or lack of interest.

¹ Quinn and Poirer, 2006

² Students with disabilities can take longer than four years to graduate; they are eligible for educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) until the age of 21.

A. Dropout and Graduation in Montgomery County

This section describes dropout and graduation trends in MCPS high schools over five years, FY06 through FY10. MCPS collects and reports dropout and graduation data following Maryland State Department of Education requirements. Reporting requirements for FY11 changed to reflect updated measures of race, ethnicity, and graduation. Thus, the data in this chapter do not include FY11 since trend data are not available.

1. Dropout Trends

MCPS calculates dropout rates based on the number of students in Grades 9-12 who leave school in a given school year. Tables 1 and 2 describe MCPS dropout data from FY06 to FY10. In sum, the tables show that during this time frame, on average:

- About 1,200 students dropped out of MCPS annually, reflecting 2.5% of high school enrollment;
- Dropout rates were 50% higher for males than females (2.9% vs. 2.0%);
- Dropout rates were three to five times higher for Latino and black students compared to Asian and white students (3.4%-4.9% vs. 0.9%-1.3%); and
- Dropout rates were also higher for English language learners (4.9%), students receiving free and reduced priced meals (3.5%), and students with disabilities (2.9%) compared to all students.

Table 1: Annual Number of MCPS High School Dropouts, FY06 – FY10

	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	Annual Average
Number of Dropouts	988	1,342	1,404	1,319	963	1,203
Total Number of Students	49,283	49,562	49,005	48,569	48,662	49,016
Dropout Rate (%)	2.0	2.7	2.9	2.7	2.0	2.5

Source: Maryland Report Card

Table 2: MCPS High School Dropout Data by Student Subgroup, FY06 to FY10

	Average # of Dropouts Per Year	Average Annual Drop-Out Rate
All Students	1,203	2.5
Student Subgroups		
Latino	478	4.9
Black	401	3.4
White	253	1.3
Asian	64	0.9
English language learners	130	4.9
Students receiving free/reduced priced meals	349	3.5
Students with disabilities	169	2.9
Male	734	2.9
Female	469	2.0

Sources: Maryland Report Card and MCPS

Dropout numbers and rates varied by school as noted in Table 3. The data demonstrate that:

- The average annual number of dropouts per high school ranged from five (Poolesville) to 96 (Montgomery Blair);
- The average dropout rate for comprehensive high schools ranged from 0.4% at Winston Churchill to 4.6% at Wheaton; and
- MCPS’ alternative programs focused on dropout prevention and recovery (e.g., Alternative Programs and Gateway to College) had the highest dropout rates ranging from 5.1% to 31.8%.

Table 3: MCPS Dropout Data by School

	FY10 Enrollment 9/30/09	Average # of Dropouts Per Year, FY06 to FY10	Average Annual Dropout Rate
Poolesville HS	1,150	5	0.5%
Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents*	85	7	5.1%
Winston Churchill HS	2,087	9	0.4%
Thomas S. Wootton HS	2,413	12	0.5%
Walt Whitman HS	1,941	15	0.7%
Damascus HS	1,412	19	1.1%
Clarksburg HS**	1,714	21	1.3%
Walter Johnson HS	2,060	23	1.0%
Bethesda-Chevy Chase HS	1,830	23	1.2%
Sherwood HS	2,094	26	1.1%
Seneca Valley HS	1,342	34	2.1%
Rockville HS	1,222	38	2.7%
James Hubert Blake HS	1,785	42	2.0%
Paint Branch HS	1,849	42	2.1%
Northwest HS	2,047	42	1.9%
Col. Zadok Magruder HS	1,912	43	1.9%
Quince Orchard HS	1,814	43	2.2%
Richard Montgomery HS	2,049	45	2.1%
Northwood HS	1,397	48	3.7%
John F. Kennedy HS	1,560	50	2.9%
Watkins Mill HS	1,537	66	3.4%
Springbrook HS	1,792	66	3.1%
Alternative Programs	176	68	17.6%
Wheaton HS	1,220	70	4.6%
Gaithersburg HS	2,013	72	3.0%
Albert Einstein HS	1,551	72	3.9%
Gateway to College	154	94	31.8%
Montgomery Blair HS	2,789	96	3.1%
Other Dropouts		27	n/a

*For grades 9-12; **Data based on four years: FY07 – FY10

Sources: Maryland Report Card and MCPS

2. 2010 Graduation Data

Graduation rates are measured in a variety of ways. Historically, MCPS has reported what is called a graduation “leaver rate.” This formula divides the number of graduates in a year (e.g., 2010) by the number of graduates plus the number of dropouts estimated to have left that class over the last four years (e.g., 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010).

In 2011, the Maryland State Department of Education began requiring schools to report graduation rates based on a “cohort rate.” This method tracks a cohort of 9th graders and accounts for all students who enter or exit that class over the next four years. This change is in response to anticipated new requirements from the federal Department of Education expected in 2012.

Exhibit 1 compares the graduation leaver and cohort rates and Table 4 compares these two measures using 2010 graduation data for MCPS.

Exhibit 1: Comparison of Graduation “Leaver” and “Cohort” Rates

Leaver Rate	Cohort Rate
$\frac{\text{Number of Graduates}}{(\text{9}^{\text{th}} \text{ graders}) + (\text{Estimated Dropouts})}$	$\frac{\text{Number of Graduates}}{(\text{9}^{\text{th}} \text{ graders}) + (\text{Transfers in}) - (\text{Dropouts and Transfers out})}$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dropouts are estimated • Does not account for transfers in and out • Does not account for students who take more than four years to graduate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dropouts are known • Accounts for transfers in and out • Students who take more than four years to graduate are still counted in the 9th grade cohort

Table 4: Graduation Leaver Rate vs. Graduation Cohort Rate, Class of 2010

	2010		
	Leaver (L)	Cohort (C)	Difference (C-L)
All Students	90.0	86.0	-4.0
Student Subgroups			
Asian	96.4	94.7	-1.7
Black	85.8	78.0	-7.8
Latino	79.3	74.0	-5.3
White	95.3	93.7	-1.6
Special Education	81.0	59.5	-21.5
ESOL	70.7	52.3	-18.4
FARMS	84.0	73.4	-10.6
Male	87.9	83.6	-4.3
Female	92.3	89.0	-3.3

Source: Maryland Report Card

Overall, the cohort rate is a more precise measure of the percent of students who graduate on time and results in a lower MCPS graduation rate than the leaver rate. The cohort rate also offers a starker contrast in the graduation gap among student groups. More specifically, the cohort data indicate:

- A 20-21 point graduation gap between Latino students and white and Asian students;
- A 14-17 point graduation gap between black students and white and Asian students;
- A 5 point graduation gap between male and female students;
- About half of students receiving ESOL services graduated within four years;
- Fewer than 60% of students with disabilities graduated within four years; and
- About 73% of students receiving FARMS graduated within four years.

B. The Cost of Dropping Out

The consequences of dropping out are significant for both individuals and society. This section reviews the lost earning potential of dropouts and the cumulative costs to society. Together, the consequences of dropping out demonstrate the importance of implementing programs and practices designed to help students complete high school.

A 2011 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compared 2009 earnings among adults ages 25 – 34 who were employed full time based on educational attainment. The report found that, compared to individuals without a high school diploma or GED, individuals with a diploma or equivalent earned 43% more, those with an associate’s degree earned 71% more, and those with a bachelor’s degree earned 114% more. The gaps in earning potential have grown since 1980.³ In addition, women without a high school diploma on average earn less than their male counterparts.⁴

Dropouts are also at a disadvantage competing for employment. The NCES study reports that only 47% of dropouts ages 25 – 34 worked full time for a full year in 2009, compared to 55% with a high school diploma or equivalent, 65% with an associate’s degree, and 69% of those with at least a bachelor’s degree.⁵ In addition, a 2007 study indicated that dropouts are more likely to be unemployed and are less likely to have employer-provided health insurance and pension plans.⁶

In addition to the individual costs, there are societal costs of dropping out. Dropouts contribute less to the tax base due to lower earning potential.⁷ Dropouts are also more likely to receive public assistance⁸ and the costs of publicly funded health care for dropouts have been found to be higher than that for graduates.⁹ Furthermore, dropouts are overrepresented in the justice system. While dropouts make up about 25% of the general population, they make up 68% of the prison population.¹⁰

³ Aud, S., et. al., 2011

⁴ Webster, B. H. Jr. and Bishaw, A., 2006, in Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

⁵ Aud, S., et. al., 2011

⁶ Rouse, C.E., 2007, in Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Waldfogel, J., Garfinkel, I., and Kelly, B., 2007, in Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

⁹ Muennig, P., 2007, in Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

¹⁰ Harlow, C. W., 2003, in Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

Barton of ETS suggests that it may be becoming more difficult for dropouts to earn a GED and continue with higher education; as support, he cites a substantial drop in federal funding for “secondchance” education programs. In constant 2003 dollars, federal funding fell from \$15 billion in 1971 to \$3 billion in 2003 for such programs.¹¹ At the same time, researchers stress that not only do students need a high school degree, but they will need post-secondary education as well to support a family.¹²

C. Student and School Risk Factors

Studies indicate that there are a wide variety of factors that influence the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. This section summarizes findings from five articles that each reviewed numerous studies of dropout factors.¹³ Overall, it is important to recognize that:

- No single factor accurately predicts whether a student will drop out; and
- Dropping out is often a process of disengagement, with various factors building over time to culminate in the dropout event.¹⁴

Generally, the factors described in the literature include individual, school, and community/family-based factors. Exhibit 2 below summarizes risk factors that were commonly identified in studies:

Exhibit 2: Summary of Dropout Risk Factors

Type of Challenge	Risk Factors
Individual	Low academic achievement Poor attendance Overage for grade Disciplinary problems Low commitment to school
School	Teacher quality Student-teacher ratio School size
Family/Community	Low socioeconomic status Student who works many hours per week Parenthood Low level of education of parents High family mobility

Further, Tyler and Loftstrom suggest that tests required for graduation could discourage low-achieving students, further increasing the dropout rate. However, studies about this topic are mixed, with some studies showing a strong link and others showing little or no link between dropout rates and exit tests required for graduation.¹⁵

¹¹ Barton, 2005

¹² Hooker, S. & Brand, B., 2009

¹³ Barton, 2005; GAO, 2002; Hammond, et. al., 2007; Rotermund, 2007; Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

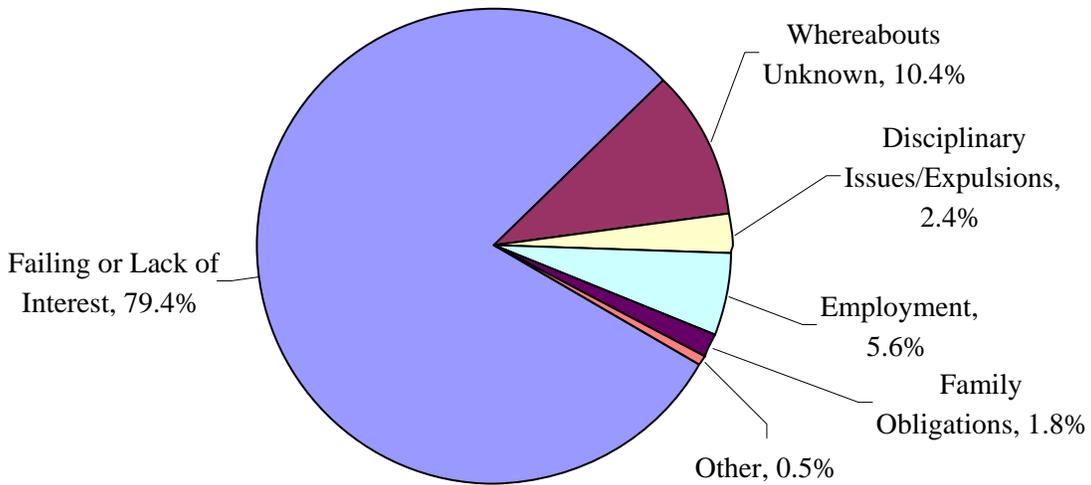
¹⁴ Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009; Hammond, et. al., 2007; GAO, 2002

¹⁵ Tyler and Loftstrom, 2009

Barton suggests that an additional factor that impacts dropout rates is a lack of guidance counseling for at-risk students. Barton hypothesizes that the low ratio of counselors to students and the emphasis on helping students schedule classes and prepare for college reduce the opportunity for guidance counselors to engage at-risk students and help prevent their dropping out.¹⁶

Reasons MCPS Students Give for Dropping Out. Data from MCPS show that students give reasons for dropping out that align with risk factors described above. Data from 2008-09 described in Exhibit 3 show that “failing or lack of interest” was by far the most common reason offered for dropping out, accounting for 79.4% of responses, followed by “whereabouts unknown” that accounted for 10.4% of responses.

Exhibit 3: Reasons MCPS Students Dropped Out, 2009



Source: MCPS

¹⁶ Barton, 2005

Chapter III: The Policy Context for Alternative Education

Concerns about the high school dropout crisis have focused attention on at-risk youth and the policies and programs available to support them. Nationally, researchers estimate that roughly two million young people between 16 and 24 are not working, not in school and without a degree.

Alternative education programs can offer students who are struggling or who have left school an opportunity to achieve in a new setting and use creative, individualized learning methods. Alternative education can also be invaluable in helping communities offer multiple pathways to success for all high school students, including those who are not succeeding in a traditional school environment.

This chapter describes how federal, state, and local governments, through legislation, policy, and other initiatives, can support alternative education programs that reconnect youth to education and the workplace. It incorporates research from academic scholars, federal agencies, and nonprofit organizations specializing in youth development and education policies. It has three parts:

- A. Federal Policy Context** describes the federal role in reconnecting at-risk youth to education and the workforce, the context for current second chance programs, and federal opportunities for program improvement;
- B. State Policy Context** describes the state role in developing and enhancing alternative education pathways, model state policies, and state opportunities for improvement; and
- C. Local Policy Context** describes the local role in developing and enhancing alternative education pathways, challenges to implementation, and opportunities for improvement.

Several findings emerge from the information reviewed:

- No federal agency has primary responsibility for at-risk youth who are in or out of school. Instead, hundreds of programs administered by more than a dozen departments often operate in isolation, creating concerns about fragmentation, duplication, and overlap as well as unnecessary complexity for local providers. Efforts to improve coordination over the past 20 years have had limited success.
- Alternative education is emerging as a key strategy to reconnect youth to education and the labor force. Public and non-profit organizations, including charter schools, are expanding the array of alternative education and second chance options and principles from positive youth development are providing an organizing framework for these efforts.
- State alternative education policies vary widely in scope and intensity. States with more comprehensive policies address how students will be identified for services, what supports must be provided, and how state education funds can be used.
- Alternative education, dropout prevention, and recovery are not policy priorities in Maryland. Recent assessments of how policies in the 50 states and the District of Columbia align with model policy recommendations for alternative education and dropout prevention found Maryland has not achieved any of the recommended policy elements.
- Counties, cities, and school districts all have potential roles to play in the development and delivery of comprehensive alternative education programs.

A. Federal Policy Context

A review of the policy papers and research on the federal role in alternative education notes the following: no federal agency has primary responsibility for alternative education or the youth involved in non-traditional education.¹ While several federal agencies have taken responsibility for dealing with certain youth who participate in alternative education such as youth involved in the juvenile justice system or foster care, no federal agency's mission is designed to focus on all youth in alternative education.

Another challenge is that federally funded programs are often limited in services with little coordination focused on long-term support for needy youth. Federal programs often respond to specific needs/demographics of at-risk youth rather than their needs as a whole. For example, funds from the Department of Health and Human Services often focus on mental and physical health issues of youth or the well-being of foster youth which limit the use of funds for education and general support; and funds from the Departments of Justice and Labor tend to focus respectively on reducing unsafe activities and attaining workforce skills but rarely on long-term educational goals.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report on Vulnerable Youth finds that federal programs, operating in isolation from one another, target specific needs concentrated in six areas (CRS-21):

- Workforce development,
- Education,
- Juvenile justice and delinquency preventions,
- Social services,
- Public health, and
- National and community service.

Absent a coherent policy framework, CRS states “despite the range of federal services and activities to assist disadvantaged youth, many of these programs have not developed into a coherent system of support.”² In 2003, the report of the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth identified similar concerns about program duplication and overlap. It said issues of mission fragmentation, mission creep, poor coordination for subgroups of youth, and limited program accountability characterized the administration of federal youth programs (CRS-34 and CRS-35).

Federal legislation to improve service delivery and program coordination has been enacted numerous times since 1990 with mixed success. In 2006 Congress adopted the Tom Osborne Youth Coordination Act to improve coordination across federal agencies, and, in 2008, the President established a federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs by executive order. Other efforts, e.g., legislative proposals to create a federal children, youth and families council (1990), a youth community development block grant (1995), or state grant funding (2001), have not been fully implemented or funded.

¹ See Martin and Brand, Smith, Thomas J., and U.S. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress on Vulnerable Youth: Background and Policies.

² See CRS Report RL33975, Summary.

Second Chance Programs.³ Employment and training programs for low-skilled adults and disconnected or inactive youth are sometimes referred to as “second chance” programs. Their dual focus on occupational and educational training mirrors approaches found in alternative education and career technical education programs.

The Department of Labor has primary responsibility for federal employment policy and training programs; however, federal funding cuts in the seventies devolved program responsibilities to state and local governments. Since then, funding responsibilities for employment and training programs for adults and youth has rested primarily with local governments.

At the local level, the service delivery network for second chance programs consists primarily of community based organizations, community colleges, for profit and non-profit training organizations and others. Quality programs exist; however, a limited strategic perspective has characterized the youth employment field as a whole. For example, no nationally recognized standards exist for “youth workers,” and salaries are low.

Educational assistance and instruction have been longstanding requirements in federal job training legislation; however, these requirements have posed considerable challenges for youth employment training programs and the capacity of the second chance field to meet these challenges has been limited.⁴ Through the mid-90’s education support for those out of school was largely provided through adult basic education programs in the Department of Labor.

Today, charter schools and the youth development movement may offer more promising opportunities for out-of-school youth. Charter schools may have more capacity to serve out-of-school youth than the current array of educational programs and concepts from youth development may bring an organizing framework to federal policies and programs.

Opportunities for Improvement. The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF)⁵ has identified the following as opportunities at the federal level for improving alternative education programs:

- Increase coordination of programs to meet the comprehensive needs of youth at-risk;
- Facilitate the inclusion of alternative education providers in education funding requirements to enable the funding of effective community based programs;
- Allow schools to receive K-12 funding for students until age 21 to encourage dropout recovery programs;
- Develop a system for tracking students to identify and expand effective programs;
- Improve data on actual funding for alternative education programming;
- Provide technical assistance to alternative education providers to improve program quality;
- Create learning networks of alternative education providers to enhance their capacity;
- Encourage data collection and program evaluation to support program improvement;
- Develop model state and local legislation;

³ Smith, Thomas J.

⁴ An exception to this approach was the School to Work Opportunities Act, legislation enacted in 1989 that was modeled on European (primarily German) apprenticeship programs. A central feature of this legislation was a formal partnership between the Departments of Labor and Education. See Smith, Thomas J., pp. 18-20.

⁵ The American Youth Policy Forum is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization that provides learning opportunities for staff and others working on youth policy issues at the national, state and local levels. See Martin and Brand, pp. 27-30.

- Expand on existing successful programs; and
- Examine NCLB accountability requirements based on academic standard vis-a-vis alternative education programs requirements based on competency standards.

B. State Policy Context

As states work to improve secondary education, they are faced with the task of engaging students at-risk of dropping out of school and reconnecting those who have already left. Additional public institutions that share responsibility with secondary education for youth acquiring the necessary academic, occupational, and social/behavioral skills to become engaged workers include community colleges, public universities, workforce development boards, public assistance agencies, and criminal and juvenile justice agencies. In creating expanded options for high school-aged youth, states can address a range of alternative education policies that can impact these institutions.

Alternative Education in Maryland. In 2006, a task force established by the General Assembly, examined issues related to raising the age of compulsory attendance in Maryland, including the need for a statewide alternative education infrastructure.⁶ The task force submitted its final report, *Attending to Learn: The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance*, in December 2007.

The taskforce subcommittee that surveyed Maryland's current practices and programs reported they found weaknesses in data collected on programs across the state. Some of these weaknesses included: significant discrepancies among districts in what is identified as an alternative education or dropout prevention program; inconsistent program evaluation data; a lack of comparable data across programs that made per student cost comparisons difficult if not impossible; differences in the demographics of Maryland's dropout's compared to dropouts nationally; and an apparent lack of sufficient structures to engage families of dropouts. (pages 91-92)

The subcommittee reported that the State of Maryland, unlike several other states, "has no formal definition of alternative education in place." (page 92) The subcommittee suggested that local districts must address school climate, adult expectations, scaffolding for learning, and relevant content for students "to keep youth productively engaged in working toward a diploma" and noted that "the support students will need is often identified as alternative education." (page 92)

The subcommittee also addressed the need for partnerships, stating "In order to ensure the success of an initiative to meet the needs of students who are in the age range of 16 to 18 years, and who, for whatever reason, have been unable to complete high school, an extensive and sophisticated network of interagency collaboration needs to be in place." (page 94) The report continued:

⁶ Maryland law (Education Article Section 7-301: Compulsory Attendance) mandates that every child must attend school from age 5 through age 15. The specified exceptions include: age 16 and lack of academic success or lack of interest. Creation of the task force in 2006 followed defeat in the General Assembly of legislation that would have raised the state's compulsory school age. Based on 2005 dropout data, the task force subcommittee estimated roughly 21,000 students statewide would continue their education; and the estimated costs for these students was a one-time capacity cost of \$45.6 million and annual ongoing costs of \$200 million. MCPS' shares of these estimates were 1,761 additional students, \$6.6 million in one-time costs and \$20.7 million in annual ongoing costs. See Maryland State Department of Education, *Attending to Learn*. In the 2011 session, Senate Bill 41 again raised the issue, proposing to phase in an increase in the state's mandatory school age from 15 to 17. This legislation was defeated largely because of its estimated costs. In 2012, Senate Bill 362 again proposes to increase the compulsory age of attendance to 17.

Without a solid foundation of well articulated and established partnerships, the initiative has a greatly diminished possibility for success. Certainly, the school systems have a great deal of responsibility for providing the most appropriate service to all students. However, the federal, state and local governments, a multitude of social service agencies and the private sector all share in this responsibility. Each in some way provides support and acts as a barrier to providing appropriate programming and experiences for the students who are not completing high school. (page 94)

Based on its work, the subcommittee recommended that the State Board develop a definition of alternative education “that addresses different modes of instruction and age-appropriate implementation of strategies targeted to the population likely to, or who has already, voluntarily dropped out of school.” (page 95) This was one of six recommendations the task force proposed as part of its comprehensive response to Maryland’s high school dropout problem. (See Appendix C for the task force report’s Executive Summary.)

Alternative Education in Other States. An AYPF paper prepared for the Department of Labor reports that the aspects of alternative education that state policies address typically include:

- Defining alternative education;
- Eligibility requirements;
- Funding;
- Issues related to curriculum and assessments; and
- Other areas, such as teacher standards.

While states have primary responsibility for establishing these alternative education policy levers, according to AYPF, they exercise this responsibility with varying degrees of intensity as follows.⁷

- States’ definitions of and approaches to alternative education vary widely, from short, ambiguous program definitions to comprehensive legislation. For example, in California, “governing boards must provide expelled students access to an alternative educational program operated by the district, the county superintendent of schools, or a consortium of districts.”⁸
- By contrast, in Missouri, “the alternative education system ... serves students who are experiencing difficulty in school and are identified as at-risk of dropping out; are of school-age, who have dropped out of school and would like to reenroll in alternative education classes; are high school graduates (or hold an equivalent diploma) who are having trouble finding employment or would like vocational training; or are people without a high school or equivalent diploma who are having difficulty finding employment or want vocational training.”⁹
- States with comprehensive legislation include California, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, and Wisconsin. In these states, the legislation address how students are identified, what supports must be put in place and how state education funds can support these students.

⁷ Martin, N. and Brand, B. 2006.

⁸ California Education Code Section 48916.1 cited by Martin and Brand (2006) p. 10

⁹ Missouri Revised Statutes Section 167.320-322 cited by Martin and Brand (2006) p. 10

- States’ approaches to funding alternative education are inconsistent. Generally, state funding for district run programs appears to straightforward, whereas access to funding for community run programs can be more problematic. A few states allow funds to “follow the student” if a student chooses to enroll in a program outside the local school district. Other states use charter school legislation to direct resources to alternative education programs.
- States often provide inadequate funding for alternative education. While additional funding is not a sole answer, most alternative education programs have few guaranteed sources of funding. Inadequate funding compromises programs’ ability to work with a population that, by most accounts, has special needs above and beyond those of typical students.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) developed a **model policy framework for alternative education** to influence states’ responses to using alternative education to address the high school dropout crisis. Shown in Exhibit 4, it calls for broadening eligibility guidelines for alternative education programs, and clarifying the state’s and local district’s roles and responsibilities.¹⁰

Exhibit 4: Jobs for the Future’s Alternative Education Model Policy

1. **Broaden Eligibility:** States should broaden eligibility guidelines, going beyond a focus on troublesome or otherwise disruptive youth to include any student who is not thriving in a traditional high school setting. The intent should be to bring alternative education into the mainstream as a legitimate pathway toward obtaining high school and postsecondary credentials.
2. **Clarify State and District Roles and Responsibilities:** States should provide districts and schools with guidance on quality standards by which to operate and manage alternative programs, while still allowing local flexibility to design alternative education to address local conditions and student needs.
3. **Strengthen accountability for results:** States should allow alternative programs the flexibility they need to move students along proficiency based pathways, while ensuring that the programs expect students to meet the common statewide standards. States also should give alternative programs credit within the state’s accountability system for reengaging and holding onto students and for hitting key benchmarks toward common graduation and college-readiness standards.
4. **Increase Support for Innovation:** States should implement strategic and comprehensive efforts to invent educational models that improve outcomes for off-track students and to scale up successful programs. States have a responsibility to provide the models and funding that support large scale innovation.
5. **Ensure High Quality Staff:** States should seek to improve the quality of alternative schools by improving the quality of instructional staff and leadership. They should also provide incentives for high-performing teachers and leaders to join alternative education programs, and they should support their ongoing professional development.
6. **Enhance Student Support Services:** States should formally recognize that academic success is virtually impossible for alternative education students without meaningful support services. States should also provide funding and other incentives for districts and schools to partner with outside organizations that specialize in these areas to ensure that students receive the full range of needed supports.
7. **Enrich Funding:** States should develop funding policies that channel more resources toward off-track students, taking into account that alternative education programs must not only reengage them but also accelerate their learning and provide intensive academic and social supports to help them succeed.

Source: Jobs for the Future, “Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy and How to Improve It,” September 2010.

¹⁰ Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a nonprofit research, consulting and advocacy organization that works to strengthen society by creating educational and economic opportunities.

JFF reported that, since 2000, 40 states and the District of Columbia had passed new legislation or put new regulations in place related to alternative education. Areas of progress included:

- Broadening eligibility;
- Clearer guidelines; and
- Funding and support services.

JFF's assessment of states' alignment with this model policy identified two states - Minnesota and Oklahoma - that had achieved partial or full compliance with all seven elements. JFF's assessment of Maryland alternative education policy found it has yet to meet any of the seven elements.

Opportunities for Improvement. The American Youth Policy Forum has identified the following as opportunities at the state level for improving alternative education programs, some of which overlap with their identified opportunities for improvement at the federal level:

- Increase focus on developing alternative education program designed for struggling students and out-of-school youth;
- Redefine curricular requirements to allow for program flexibility and awarding of credits based on competency in addition to seat time;
- Increase funding for alternative education;
- Allow schools to receive ADA funding for students at least until age 21;
- Ease the flow of funding for alternative education to follow students (e.g., outside of the public K-12 system) and into programs that award credit based on competency; and
- Develop systems for tracking students.

C. Local Policy Context

Alternative education programs are implemented at the local level, where counties, cities, and school districts all have potential roles to play in the development and delivery of programming. According to AYPF, communities that have chosen to prioritize providing alternative education options for struggling students and out-of-school youth find it hard to negotiate the maze of funding sources and regulations necessary to access various sources of financial support for such opportunities. This occurs because funding streams for alternative education programs at the local level are disjointed.

According to AYPF, cities and counties can provide leadership in efforts to expand alternative education offerings by prioritizing alternative education, especially as part of a larger program of high school reform. Local leaders can facilitate collaboration among various systems working with youth. Further, city and county leaders are also in a position to influence the availability of the support services so crucial to the success of struggling students and out-of-school youth.

According to AYPF, a range of barriers must be overcome to ensure that high quality, comprehensive alternative education programs are available and can succeed at the local level:

- **Poor Alternative Education Placements.** Districts must address how students are assigned to alternative education programs and ensure they are placed in high quality programs. Concerns to address may include whether a move to an alternative education program is a student's choice or a result of a district's zero-tolerance disciplinary plan that is unlikely to improve a student's relationship to school and learning; and whether school districts assign poor performing and disruptive students to alternative education with little attention paid to the quality of the program or the range of supports to help students learn or catch up.
- **Limitations of Curriculum and Program Design.** Local and state requirements of time can prove challenging for programs seeking to meet their students' educational and social needs through open-entry/open-exit programs, expanded and compressed programs, credit-recovery, work and experienced-based learning, or flexible scheduling. State legislation allowing for such flexibility is critical to the expansion of alternative education options.
- **Limited Funding.** Like at the state level, additional funding is not an answer in and of itself. However, inadequate funding compromises programs' ability to work with a population that, by most accounts, has special needs above and beyond those of typical students.

Opportunities for Improvement. At the local level, AYPF has identified the following opportunities for improving alternative education programs:

- **Expand options for all students.** Local educational agencies can partner with other school systems and community-based partners to offer ALL students multiple pathways to a recognized credential, with options such as flexible scheduling, compressed and expanded programs, dual enrollment, credit-recovery, career-based programs, and adult high school.
- **Encourage postsecondary connections.** In particular, community colleges can serve older, out-of-school youth seeking to continue their education (GED, high school completion, and post-secondary training).
- **Foster cross system collaboration.** Cities and counties can take a more active role in forging collaboration among various local agencies serving young people so that programming and funding can be coordinated and no young persons get "lost" in the cracks of the system.

Chapter IV: Alternative Education Programs in Montgomery County

This chapter offers background on alternative education programs in Montgomery County and available data on program participation, costs, and performance. This chapter also describes the alignment between alternative education policies and options in Montgomery County and national trends and identifies some of the drivers that shape the current delivery of alternative education in Montgomery County. This chapter is presented in four parts:

- A. **MCPS Alternative Education Programs**, describes the main features and available enrollment, budget, and performance data for MCPS' Alternative I, II, and III programs;
- B. **Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA)**, describes the special education school for students with significant needs due to emotional disabilities;
- C. **Other MCPS Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs**, describes the main features and available data on additional MCPS programs and services aimed at reducing and recovering drop-outs including High School Plus and Summer School;
- D. **MCPS Career and Technology Education Programs¹**, describes how the school system administers its career and technology education programs for students at-risk and available data on enrollment, performance, and program costs; and
- E. **Other County-Funded Programs Inclusive of Dropout Prevention and Recovery Services**, describes program features and available budget and enrollment data for other County-funded dropout-prevention and recovery programs available to youth in the County, including Gateway to College. Youth programs that provide dropout prevention and recovery services as part of a broader mission focused on youth development are also described.

Several findings emerge from the information and data reviewed for this chapter:

- MCPS' alternative education programs as well as RICA focus on students who have been unsuccessful due to a variety of challenges.
- Most of MCPS' alternative education programs and services (e.g., Alternative I programs, High School Plus) are delivered in comprehensive schools rather than in separate facilities.
- MCPS students are most often placed in alternative programs due to academic, social/emotional, and attendance challenges and disciplinary infractions. Students are not assigned to alternative programs due to teen pregnancy or parenthood.
- MCPS has not evaluated its alternative education programs to discern their effectiveness at increasing high school completion rates or preparing youth for colleges and careers.²
- MCPS offers a wide variety of career and technical education opportunities as part of its 38 career pathway programs that aspire to promote both college and career readiness. Most of these programs, however, are designed for students who are performing at or above grade level rather than for students who are at-risk of not graduating with a diploma.

¹ MCPS and the Maryland State Department of Education refer to career and technical education programs as career and technology education programs. References to career and technical education included in this report also refer to technology education programs.

² As described in Appendix D, MCPS has formative evaluations of its Alternative I, II, and III program aimed at providing feedback to program staff to increase program effectiveness. These evaluations, however, did not evaluate the impact of these programs on students' college or career readiness.

- There are only a few dropout recovery programs available in the County and all but one of these programs (Online Pathway to Graduation) operates outside of MCPS.
- It is unclear whether the County's current supply of dropout prevention and recovery programs and services, including MCPS' current alternative education options, adequately meets the demand for such services among current and former MCPS students.

A. MCPS Alternative Education Programs

MCPS' alternative education programs and schools generally refer to its Alternative I, II, and III programs described in this section. Alternative I programs are housed at each MCPS comprehensive secondary school to address challenges among students at-risk of dropping out who are not receiving special education services. Students in Alternative I programs in need of more significant interventions can be referred to Alternative II programs housed at separate campuses. And, in lieu of expulsion, students with and without disabilities are placed in Alternative III programs that are also housed at separate campuses. A description of these three programs follows.

1. Alternative I Programs

MCPS' Alternative I Programs serve students who have experienced academic difficulties for a variety of reasons including behavioral and social emotional concerns. These programs are offered in every comprehensive MCPS middle and secondary school, however each school has the autonomy to design their programs to meet the needs of their student body.³ According to MCPS' Master Plan, these home school programs typically provide direct instruction and intervention strategies to students who require support with behavior, motivation, attendance, academics, social, and emotional skills. In 2005, approximately 2,000 students were enrolled in Alternative I programs.⁴

Referrals. Referrals to Alternative I programs are made by school-level intervention teams (i.e., Collaborative Problem Solving teams) for students experiencing academic and behavioral difficulties that have been unresponsive to the instructional and/or behavioral interventions provided to date. After the student's response to intervention has been documented via Teacher Referral Report Form 272-2, reports cards, other sources of data, and anecdotal information, a referral for the Alternative I program at that student's home school is made.

MCPS' 2005 survey of alternative education programs identified academic and attendance concerns as the most common reasons for Alternative I placements followed by disciplinary issues in middle school, and loss of credit issues in high school.⁵ Table 5 on the next page describes the percentage of MCPS schools indicating the common rationales for entry into their Alternative I programs. These rationales reflect school-wide challenges that lead to need for interventions or corrective action.

³ Consistent with national norms targeting alternative education programs in the secondary grades – National Center for Education Statistics

⁴ MCPS Memo to Board of Education, November 8, 2005

⁵ The Board of Education ended the loss of credit practice ended in 2009.

Table 5: Percentage of Schools Indicating Rationale for Their Alternative I Program

Rationale	Middle School	High School
Academic Concerns	100.0%	100.0%
Attendance Concerns	72.2%	76.2%
Loss of Credit Issues	n/a	66.7%
Discipline Referrals	63.9%	47.6%
Suspension Rate	36.1%	38.1%
Special Education/504 Support	5.6%	9.5%
Eligibility for Extra-Curricular Activities	5.6%	4.8%
School's Drop-Out Rate	2.8%	28.6%
Alternative Program Referrals	44.1%	38.1%
Source: Figure 2 from November 8, 2005 Memo to BOE		

MCPS' 2005 survey of alternative programs also identifies the target populations for Alternative I programs: students experiencing academic concerns, social concerns, behavioral concerns, lack of motivation, lack of attendance, and for middle schools, classroom disruption. The intent of this survey question was to elicit the individual student reasons that warrant a referral rather than the school-wide challenges that warrant the need for schools to provide Alternative I programs. Table 6 describes these findings by school level. Not too surprisingly, the “rationales” and “target populations” for Alternative I programs overlap.

Table 6: Percentage of Schools Indicating Target Population for Their Alternative I Program

Rationale	Middle School	High School
History of Academic Concerns	97.2	95.2
Lack of Motivation	88.9	95.2
History of Behavioral Concerns	72.2	61.9
History of Social Concerns	61.1	28.6
Lack of Regular Attendance	55.6	76.2
Family Stressors	25.0	33.3
Special Education/504 Support	25.0	23.8
Overly Social	25.0	19.0
Class Disruption	22.2	28.6
Poor Social Skills	22.2	28.6
Health Issues	11.1	9.5
Progress Toward Graduation	5.6	66.7
Extra-Curricular Participation	2.8	14.3
Substance Abuse	2.8	9.5
Lack of Anger Control	1.7	28.6
Source: Figure 3 from November 8, 2005 Memo to BOE		

Program Features. MCPS notes that “the structure of the Level I Alternative Programs in MCPS secondary schools is as widely varied as the schools they serve.”⁶ As already noted, principals are encouraged to design their Alternative I programs to meet the specific needs evident in their schools.

⁶ Larry Bowers’ memo Donald Kress, May 18, 2005 – Attachment C of November 8, 2005 BOE Packet

OLO's review found that Alternative I programs typically target services to students at high risk of dropping out who are not eligible for special education services. Alternative I classes often serve as a support class (one period out of a six or seven period day) for students to receive the additional instruction and attention they may need to hone their executive functioning/organizational skills on a daily basis. In a number of schools, alternative services are delivered on a consultative basis (e.g. an Alternative I teacher monitors a student in their regular class and offers strategies for that teacher) or as a pull out model.

MCPS recommends that each secondary school develop an Alternative I service plan that includes on or more of the following twelve components that according to MCPS research has identified (as) best practice for in-school alternative education programs:

- Early identification and intervention;
- Program flexibility;
- Student-centered environment;
- Parent/community involvement;
- Academic instruction and supports;
- Behavior instruction/management;
- Student monitoring;
- Transition planning;
- Professional development for staff;
- Mentoring of students;
- Extracurricular activities; and
- Volunteer service learning.

In 2005, a majority of schools used a single teacher to fill their full time equivalent (FTE) Alternative I teacher allocation and several schools supplemented these efforts with the support of an additional FTE to support academic interventions.⁷ Some schools split their alternative education FTE across several positions.⁸ With recent cuts to the MCPS operating budget, secondary schools are now allotted alternative education positions based on variety of factors that include the school's suspension and expulsion rate, enrollment, annual yearly progress under No Child Left Behind, FARMS rate, and referrals to Alternative II and III programs. At present, allocations for alternative education staff range from 0.2 to 1.0 FTE's per school.

Performance. According to MCPS, the vast majority of students receiving Alternative I services reached targeted outcomes (e.g., GPA of 2.0 or above, no additional suspensions) and required no additional alternative program interventions. In FY05, approximately 12% of Alternative I students were referred to Alternative II programs to receive more intensive services. The typical placement in an Alternative II program is for one to three semesters.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

2. Alternative II and III Programs

MCPS' Alternative II and III programs target more intensive services to students in greater need of behavioral and academic supports to be successful in their home schools. More specifically, MCPS:

- **Alternative II Programs** serve students who have not been successful in their home schools, even with the support of an Alternative I program. Collaborative Problem Solving teams make referrals⁹ to Alternative II programs based on the student's response to interventions previously implemented in consultation with the parent and school's pupil personnel worker.
- **Alternative III Programs** serve students who are involved in serious disciplinary action and are placed in these programs by the Chief Operating Officer in lieu of expulsion. These programs also serve students with disabilities who have been expelled.

There are four Alternative II programs for students in need of such services:

- **Glenmont Alternative Middle School** and **Hadley Farms Middle School** serve students in grades 6-8.
- **Needwood Academy High School Alternative Program** serves students in grades 9-12.
- **Phoenix at Needwood Academy** provides a recovery support program for students to receive their education while they are in treatment for substance abuse.

There are two Alternative III programs that serve students involved in serious disciplinary infractions that are referred by the Chief Operating Officer to alternative education in lieu of expulsion:

- **Fleet Street Middle School** that serves students in grades 6-8.
- **Randolph Academy High School** serves students in grades 9-12. This school also oversees the **45-day interim educational setting**¹⁰ for students with disabilities in grades 6-12

Alternative II middle school programs are located in separate facilities. All other Alternative II and III programs are located at the Blair Ewing Center for Alternative Programs.

Referrals. In 2005, MCPS staff informed the Board that the primary reason for referrals at the middle school level to Alternative II programs were disruptive behavior followed lack of lack of academic progress and then attendance. At the high school level, attendance was the primary reason for Alternative II placements followed by lack of academic progress, substance abuse, and disruptive behavior. As noted in Table 7 on the next page, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey of districts identified reasons for student transfers to alternative programs and schools also indicates that attendance (chronic truancy), academic progress (failure), and disruptive behavior (verbal) are significant determinants of transfers.

⁹ They complete the "Referral for Alternative Program Placement" packet and submit it to Alternative Programs. Once the student is accepted and exit criteria are agreed upon, the student begins the Alternative II program as soon as transportation can be arranged.

¹⁰ For students with individualized education programs who are also involved with drugs, weapons, or serious bodily injury offenses.

Table 7: Percent of Districts Reporting Reasons That Could Justify Alternative Placements

Reasons for Alternative Program Transfer:	2007-08
Possession, distribution or use of alcohol or drugs	57%
Physical attacks or fights	61%
Chronic truancy	53%
Possession or use of weapon (other than a firearm)	51%
Continual academic failure	57%
Disruptive verbal behavior	57%
Possession or use of a firearm	42%
Arrest or involvement with the juvenile justice system	42%
Teen pregnancy/parenthood	31%
Mental health needs	27%
Source: NCES	

The NCES survey, however, notes disciplinary offenses as the most likely reasons for transfers to alternative schools and programs, including possession, distribution, or use of intoxicants, physical attacks, and possession or use of a weapon. These referral reasons align more closely with the factors that lead to Alternative III placements with MCPS. More specifically, MCPS Regulation JFA-RA, *Student’s Rights and Responsibilities*, states that the following offenses require mandatory recommendations for expulsion that could justify an Alternative III placement:

- Evidence of intent to distribute or distribution of controlled dangerous substances;
- Possession of bombs, or facsimile, or bomb threat;
- Possession of firearms, including starter guns;
- Violent physical attack on student or staff member that requires medical attention beyond the school health room; and
- Weapons used to cause bodily harm/injury.

Additionally, MCPS schools have the discretion to recommend expulsion for 17 other offenses that include fire setting, gang-related incidents, possession or use of intoxicants, sexual offenses, and theft. Any of these offenses could justify an Alternative III placement as well. Yet, unlike NCES survey results indicating that teen pregnancy can also lead to alternative placements, MCPS does not provide alternative education for most pregnant teens or teen mothers beyond the Home and Hospital Teaching Program.¹¹

Program Features. The key features of MCPS’ Alternative II and III programs include small class sizes, individualized instruction, collaboration with parents and agencies, and a focus on returning students to their home secondary schools by enabling students to succeed academically, behaviorally, and socially. These programs are also supported by mental health teams, and academic programs aligned with MCPS’ general education curriculum. In FY11, full-time equivalent positions assigned to the Alternative Program Budget reflected a ratio of one staff person per three students enrolled in Alternative II and III programs¹²; class sizes for both alternative middle and high school programs are capped at 12 students.

¹¹ Home and Hospital Teaching provides instruction to students with medical conditions that hinder their regular school attendance. Students receive instruction from teachers in their home or hospital placement for a minimum of six hours per week.

¹² This ratio includes all professional staff, including counselors and psychologists.

Enrollment and Costs: In FY11, approximately 200 students were enrolled in MCPS Alternative II and III programs at any point in time. The typical placement in Alternative II and III programs are one to three semesters. MCPS expended \$5 million for alternative programs for an annualized per student cost of \$25,200. MCPS’ alternative programs also experienced a mobility rate of 100% in FY11, meaning that during the past school year, approximately 200 students either entered or left its Alternative II and III programs within the course of a year. Overall, 450 students were served in MCPS’ Alternative II and III programs last year, at a per student cost of \$12,600 for a semester.

Performance: FY11 data indicate that approximately 17% of students in MCPS Alternative II and III programs dropout of school annually and that 39% were suspended at least once. As noted in Table 8 below, while the percent of students in alternative education programs due to multiple suspensions has increased since FY08, MCPS has made progress in achieving its Alternative II and III program goals for attendance, parent satisfaction, and students meeting exit criteria goals. It is important to note, however, that data compiled in the annual Schools at Glance report indicate that the overall dropout rate for these programs has ranged between 15% – 20% since FY05.¹³

Table 8: Alternative Program Performance Measures, FY08 to FY11

Performance Goals	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11 <i>Estimated</i>
Attendance: After one quarter, 75% of students will increase their attendance	n/a	50%	66%	70%
Multiple Suspensions: 50% or fewer students will be in alternative programs due to multiple suspensions	35%	46%	57%	55%
Parent Satisfaction: 95% of parents surveyed will be satisfied with the alternative programs transition process back to home schools	n/a	n/a	90%	95%
Exit Criteria: 55% of students will meet the established exit criteria for returning back to their home school by the end of the school year	41%	46%	45%	50%
Sources: MCPS Superintendent’s Recommended Operating Budgets				

Beyond the monitoring of these measures, MCPS has not undertaken an evaluation of its Alternative II and III programs to determine whether they are achieving desired outcomes.¹⁴ More specifically, MCPS has not evaluated how well students do when they return back to their comprehensive school, whether they graduate, or whether they are prepared for college or work once they leave MCPS. Nor has MCPS surveyed what happens to students who leave alternative programs either as dropouts or transfers to other systems including criminal justice facilities.¹⁵

¹³ The dropout rate was 15.3% in 2004-05, 20.1% in 2008-09, and 16.5% in 2010-11.

¹⁴ See Appendix D for a description of the formative evaluations MCPS has undertaken.

¹⁵ In the NCES 2007 survey of alternative schools, districts reported that 5 percent of their students transferred to a juvenile justice facility.

B. Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents

The Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA) at Rockville is a comprehensive public special education school and therapeutic community-based interagency program jointly operated by the Maryland State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and MCPS. RICA serves students in need of a highly structured and therapeutically integrated environment from grades 5-12. It is one of two such public schools in the state to provide an academic and behavioral day and residential program for students with emotional disabilities. RICA serves students in Montgomery County and several nearby counties. Approximately two-thirds of RICA's students are day-students; the remaining third are residential students.

Referrals. Most, but not all students at RICA have an individualized education plan (IEP) and special education classification indicating an emotional disability. Students with emotional disabilities are typically referred to RICA when mental health and school interventions have been unsuccessful, including less restrictive special education placements. Behaviors that can lead to referrals to RICA include severe depression, mood disorder, psychotic behavior, and serious criminal behavior. MCPS students at RICA are referred by the Central IEP process; students from other jurisdictions are referred by their central office if space at RICA is available.

Program Features. In addition to offering a comprehensive educational program for all students, RICA offers both day and residential treatments for students ranging in age from 10 to 18. MCPS provides educational services while the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene provides mental health and therapeutic services. Length of stay is variable, depending on the student's individual needs. In general, all students are enrolled for at least one year.

RICA's program scope includes a middle school program, high school program, special education case management, physical and psychiatric medical care, and day and residential treatment (including individual, group, family, and expressive therapies), and Evaluation and Brief Assessment Units. The State medical staff at RICA has also recently earned certification to offer substance abuse treatment to students with co-occurring conditions (e.g., major psychiatric diagnoses and substance abuse issues).

Enrollment and Costs. In FY11, about 95 students on average were enrolled in RICA at any point in time. MCPS budgeted \$4.3 million for RICA for an annualized per student cost of \$45,000. RICA also experienced a mobility rate of nearly 100% in FY11, meaning that during the past school year, that 95 students either entered or left RICA within the course of a year. Much of RICA's mobility results from its evaluation and brief assessment functions that are intended to deliver services within a short period of time (e.g., 30-90 days). Overall, about 190 students were served by one of RICA's programs in FY11.

Performance. FY11 data indicate that approximately 4% of RICA students drop out of school annually and that 6% of students were suspended compared to 24% of students in FY10. Data tracked by RICA also indicate a decline in the use of physical restraints, reduction in bullying reports, and increase in PSAT participation among 10th grade students.

C. Other MCPS Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs

Beyond its offering of Alternative I, II, and III programs that serve students with behavior, discipline, and/or attendance challenges and RICA that targets services to students at-risk with emotional disabilities, MCPS offers programs for other students at risk of not graduating on time. Three of these programs, summarized below, focus on providing students second chance opportunities to earn core academic credits for graduation.

- **High School Plus** provides students access to credit-recovery classes and repeater course sections during and at the end of the school day. These course sections enable students to earn credit in previously failed courses. High School Plus also offers some original credit courses and support for students needing to complete HSA Bridge Projects¹⁶ to graduate.
- **Online Pathway to Graduation** program provides current and former students who are three credits short of graduation the opportunity to earn credits online as needed to meet High School Assessments requirements.
- **Summer School** serves both students at-risk and not at-risk by providing opportunities for students to earn original credits and recovery credits in courses they failed. MCPS states that 4,742 students were served in its high school core/non-core programs this past year. The total budget for Summer School has averaged around \$2 million between FY09 and FY12, so per student costs have been about \$424 per student.¹⁷ Tuition fees account for nearly all of Summer School revenue.

Additionally, MCPS' Bridge to Excellence Master Plan identifies the following dropout prevention strategies aimed at ensuring all students meet State of Maryland graduation and dropout benchmarks, especially low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and Latinos:

- **Data monitoring, collaborative problem solving, and student support services** to identify and address academic and behavioral issues that impact student learning;
- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports** in 83 schools (78 comprehensive schools, 3 alternative programs, and 2 special education schools) to improve school climate and address behavioral challenges;
- **The Truancy Court Program and Interagency Truancy Review Board** to prevent truancy among middle school students in two high-impact middle schools and to reduce truancy among students with chronic unexcused absenteeism;
- **Additional itinerant ESOL counselors** (7 FTE) in the 26 secondary schools with Multidisciplinary Education Training and Support (METS) programs to help keep ESOL students on track for graduation.

¹⁶ HSA Bridge Projects enable students to demonstrate mastery in content areas not passed via the regular Maryland High School Assessments.

¹⁷ For FY12, the cost for Summer Regional High School was \$300 per half-credit for core courses, with a reduced cost of \$85 for families earned less than \$29,812 per year and \$120 for families earning between \$29,812 and \$42,425 annually.

Additionally, the Maryland State Department of Education's Dropout Prevention and School Completion Resource Guide (2011) describes the following interventions, strategies, and personnel employed by MCPS to increase its graduate rate:

- Pupil Personnel Workers;
- Honors Advanced Placement Identification Tool;
- Reading and Math Interventions via its extended day/extended year programs;
- The George B. Thomas Learning Academy; and
- Student Withdrawal Interview.

Finally, within the last school year, MCPS has expanded its **Attendance Matters** program to target students who have missed 10 percent or more of their classes within a month. MCPS reports that this initiative, led by its Pupil Personnel Worker staff has had a favorable impact on attendance at the elementary school level.

D. MCPS Career and Technology Education Programs

Alternative education approaches utilizing career and technical education (CTE), and in particular experiential and/or job-based learning opportunities, are identified in the dropout prevention best practices literature as effective practices to meet the needs of at-risk youth.¹⁸ Among the few dropout prevention programs with empirical evidence, both Career Academies and Talent Development High Schools with their emphasis on CTE have been recognized as effective approaches for reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates, particularly among at-risk students.¹⁹ This section describes MCPS' current use of CTE and career pathway programs to improve student outcomes overall and among students at-risk.

1. Career and Technology Education Programs for On Track Students

MCPS offers career and technical education (CTE) courses in all 25 comprehensive high schools, the Thomas Edison High School of Technology, the Needwood Academy, its other Alternative II and III high school programs, and RICA. MCPS' mix of CTE offerings, where most students enroll in CTE programs at their comprehensive high school rather than at a half-day or full-time CTE school, aligns with national trends in CTE programs reported by the National Center for Education Statistics.²⁰

The primary goal of CTE programs is to improve both the career and college readiness of MCPS graduates. Exhibit 5 on the next page describes the CTE offerings provided by MCPS by career clusters.

¹⁸ Dynarski and Gleason

¹⁹ See What Works Clearinghouse, 2006 and 2007

²⁰ According to NCES, comprehensive high schools account for 95% of all public high schools and 88% of CTE program either on- or off-site. Area CTE high schools (such as Edison), serve almost half of the comprehensive high schools that have CTE programs. Full-day CTE schools account for 5% of all public high schools – unlike traditional comprehensive high schools, students are required to major in an area and enroll in the 9th grade.

Exhibit 5: MCPS' Career and Technical Education Program Offerings

<p><u>Arts, Humanities, and Communications</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadcast Media • Multimedia and Interactive Technologies • Print Technologies and Digital Graphics <p><u>Biosciences, Health Sciences, and Medicine</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academy of Health Professions and Biosciences • BioMedical Sciences (Project Lead the Way) • Biotechnology • Fire and Rescue Services/Emergency Medical Tech • Medical Careers <p><u>Business Management and Finance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academy of Finance • Accounting • Business Administration • Business Administration and Management • Marketing <p><u>Construction and Development</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carpentry • Construction Electricity • Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning • Masonry • Plumbing • Principles of Architecture and CAD Technology <p><u>Education, Training, and Child Studies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academy for Teacher Education • Early Child Development 	<p><u>Engineering Technology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced Engineering (Project Lead the Way) <p><u>Environmental Resources</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certified Professional Horticulturalist <p><u>Human and Consumer Sciences</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academy of Hospitality and Tourism • Cosmetology • Hospitality Management • Manicuring/Nail Technology • Professional Restaurant Management/Culinary Arts <p><u>Information Technology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academy of Information Technology (AOIT) Programming • AOIT Networking • AOIT Information Resource Design • Cisco Networking Academy • Network Operations • Oracle Internet Academy <p><u>Law, Government, and Public Safety</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice, Law, and Society <p><u>Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automotive Body Technology/Dealership • Training • Automotive Technology/Dealership Training • Foundations of Automotive Technology <p><u>Work-Based Learning</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College/Career Research Development (CCRD)
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One or more CTE programs are available at every MCPS high school with most of these programs offering articulated credit with Montgomery College and other post-secondary institutions. The campuses with the highest number of CTE programs are:

- Gaithersburg (17);
- Thomas Edison (16);
- Paint Branch, Damascus and Sherwood (12);
- Wheaton and Thomas Wootton (11); and
- Springbrook (10).

The campuses with the fewest number of CTE programs are:

- Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (1);
- Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Winston Churchill, Poolesville, and Needwood Academy (2);
- Walter Johnson (3); and
- Montgomery Blair (4).

Recruitment and Outreach. MCPS undertakes a variety of outreach efforts to educate students about CTE program choices, including conducting classroom presentations, holding open houses, maintaining a website, and distributing CTE program literature to students. School counselors can also discuss CTE programs with students as they help them plan their high school course schedule and make decisions about future work and career goals.

Graduation Requirements. Overall, MCPS requires that students earn a minimum of 22 credits to earn a Maryland High School diploma. The recommended course sequence requires that students complete their core academic credits, particularly in the 9th and 10th grades, before advancing to electives, including CTE courses. Students typically must complete credit requirements in their core subjects before enrolling in electives.

In compliance with MSDE, MCPS high school students must meet graduation requirements through one of the following options:

- 2 credits in a foreign language and 2.5 credits in elective courses;
- 2 credits in advanced technology education and 2.5 credits in elective courses; or
- 4 credits in state-approved career and technology program and 0.5 credits in elective courses.

In addition, all students must complete one credit in technology education.

Together, these CTE course taking and graduation requirements – no CTE elective classes for students in need of recovery credits and use of CTE classes to complete the additional graduation credit requirements and the technology education credit – limit the pursuit of career pathway program to high school students performing at or above grade level. Students performing below grade level typically cannot access career programs of study within MCPS.

CTE Enrollment. MCPS data submitted to MSDE indicates the following:

- **CTE Enrollment:** There were nearly 21,000 MCPS high school students enrolled in a CTE course in FY10. CTE enrollment is heavily impacted by the number of students meeting the state technology education credit requirement.
- **CTE Concentrators:** There were 6,704 MCPS students in FY10 that had completed two or more credits in a career program of study sequence. These students represent the group of MCPS students who are pursuing the CTE course of study.
- **CTE Completers:** There were 743 CTE completers who graduated from MCPS in a State-approved career programs of study, accounting for 11% of MCPS' Class of 2010. About half of these CTE completers also completed the academic requirements for the University of Maryland System.

Budget. The MCPS FY12 budget for Career and Technology Education includes the \$8.2 million budget for CTE and the \$800,000 Student Trades Foundation budget that supports career programs of study in the Construction and Development, Information Technologies (i.e., Network Operations), and Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics career clusters. The \$9.0 million FY12 budget reflects reductions of \$800,000 and 9.9 FTE's since FY10.

The FY10 per student costs of MCPS’ CTE programs are difficult to discern given the variation in the number of CTE credits that MCPS students can earn (i.e., up to nine credits). With CTE enrollment as a denominator, per student costs were \$467; and with CTE concentrators as the denominator, per student costs were \$1,447.²¹

Career Academies. Several of MCPS’ CTE programs of study are offered in comprehensive high schools as part of their career academies serving upper class students (Grades 10-12). These academies include:

- **The Academy of Health Professions and Biosciences** at John F. Kennedy, Paint Branch, Seneca Valley, and Sherwood;
- **The Project Lead the Way BioMedical Sciences Program** at Wheaton;
- **The Academy of Finance** at Albert Einstein, Gaithersburg, Magruder, Northwest, Paint Branch, and Watkins Mill;
- **The Project Lead the Way Advanced Engineering Program** at Magruder, Paint Branch, Poolesville, Rockville, Whitman, and Wheaton;
- **The Academy of Hospitality and Tourism** at Thomas Edison and Sherwood; and
- **The Academy of Information Technology** at Damascus, Gaithersburg, Seneca Valley, Springbrook, Wheaton, and Wootton.

A few MCPS high schools also use career academies characterized by small learning communities to deliver instruction to most students, not just CTE concentrators and completers. For example, Wheaton High School has adopted an academy structure where all freshmen are enrolled in their Ninth Grade Academy and all upper classmen must enroll in one of the four career academies for information technology, biosciences, engineering, or global and cultural studies.

Thomas Edison High School of Technology: Edison serves as MCPS’ part-time CTE school for students interested in pursuing one of 16 programs described below in Exhibit 6. Students enrolled at Edison spend half of the day at their home school taking classes in core academic subjects and the remainder of their school day at Edison in a three-period CTE course tied to their specific career program of study.

Exhibit 6: CTE Programs available at Thomas Edison High School of Technology

CTE Programs ONLY available at Edison	Other CTE Programs at Edison
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print Technologies and Digital Graphics • Construction Electricity • Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning • Masonry • Plumbing • Principles of Architecture and CAD Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical Careers • Carpentry • Cosmetology • Hospitality and Tourism • Nail Technology • Professional Restaurant Management/Culinary Arts • Network Operations • Automotive Body Technology/Dealership Training • Automotive Technology/Dealership Training • Foundations of Automotive Technology

²¹ In OLO Report 2009-10, the estimated per student cost of career pathways at Thomas Edison at \$5,500 - \$6,000 per student (see page 45).

Most students enroll at Edison in their junior or senior year by applying to a specific career pathway through their home high school counseling office. Students apply in the spring for fall enrollment with admission on a first come/first-served basis, except for programs such as Medical Careers where demand exceeds capacity. Admission is based on student attendance, grades, and letters of recommendation. Generally, students must be performing at or above grade level to enroll at Edison.²²

Edison Enrollment. Data over the past five years show Edison’s enrollment has fluctuated from a high of 746 students in the FY07 to a low of 555 in FY11. Edison currently has the capacity to serve 1,000 students. In FY10, MCPS convened a Edison Career Pathway Program/Facilities Project Team to offer recommendations for improving enrollment. Overall the team encouraged MCPS consider the following changes:

- Enroll certificate-bound students with disabilities in pathways such as carpentry to help them develop specialized skills, even if they are unable to complete the entire pathway program;
- Update the hospitality and tourism pathway with a new focus;
- Generate more career connections and industry connections with under-enrolled programs;
- Downsize some under-enrolled programs (e.g., masonry) in order to expand the capacity of over-enrolled programs (e.g., medical careers).

Edison Modernization. Edison currently shares a site and facility with Wheaton High School; both schools are scheduled for modernization with completion of Wheaton by August 2015, Edison by August 2017. In September 2011, the Board of Education decided to build two separate facilities for Wheaton and Edison to modernize both campuses at a combined cost of \$115.5 million. However, the Superintendent’s recent 2013 proposed Capital Improvement Plan requests a one-year delay in the modernization of both schools due to fiscal constraints. If this proposal is enacted, Edison will not be modernized until August 2018. The modernized Edison will continue to have the capacity to serve 1,000 MCPS students in half-day programs.

2. Career and Technology Education for Special Populations

The MCPS focus to use CTE to promote college and career readiness fully aligns with State goals. MSDE’s goal for CTE is to “have all CTE students succeed in post-secondary credit-bearing courses without remediation and be ready to meet employer expectations in a technologically advanced, global society.”²³ A need for recovery credits often precludes at-risk MCPS students from enrolling in CTE programs.

Preventing and/or delaying academically at-risk students from enrolling in CTE courses, however, can create a vacuum for such students who may benefit from the hands-on approaches that often characterize CTE. Greater and/or earlier CTE course taking may improve the willingness of at-risk students to engage and persist in high school rather than dropout. Additional CTE course taking among at-risk students may also increase student readiness for the workforce whether students graduate from high school or dropout.

²² Performing at grade level refers to earning enough credits to traditionally progress through high school within four years rather than a grade point average (GPA). MCPS notes that none of Edison’s programs have GPA requirements for admission except for their Medical Careers program.

²³ See page 18 of MSDE’s A Parent’s Guide: 2011-12 School Year.

MCPS offers two exceptions to its rule of excluding academically at-risk students from pursuing CTE career pathways:

- **Transition Planning and Work Opportunities** for certificate-bound students with disabilities; and
- **The Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement Program** for high school Spanish speaking students with interrupted educations.

Both programs offer work opportunities/career and technology education to MCPS students who are not expected to graduate with a regular diploma in four years. These programs are briefly described below and in more detail in OLO Report 2009-10 – MCPS’ Career and Life-Readiness Programs.²⁴

Transition Planning and Vocational Education. “Transition planning” is a process to promote movement of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities such as vocational training, employment, or continuing education. Every MCPS student with a disability begins the transition planning process during the school year in which the student turns 14, or younger, if appropriate. The transition planning process identifies the types of services that students with disabilities will need, including:

- Identifying a student’s post high school goals;
- Assessing a student’s interest, preferences and abilities in relation to identified goals;
- Determining the courses, experiences, and program that will prepare the student;
- Supporting the student in transition-related activities;
- Determining the student’s anticipated adult service needs; and
- Linking the student and parent with potential adult services.

A key component of transition planning is supporting an IEP team’s determination of how each student with a disability will exit MCPS:

- To earn a *high school diploma*, a student must meet core credit requirements; satisfy requirements in foreign language, American sign language, advanced technology, or a Career and Technology Education (CTE) program; complete the student service learning requirement; and complete state assessment requirements.
- To earn a *high school certificate*, a student with a disability must be unable to meet the requirements for a diploma, and either be: (a) enrolled in an education program for at least four years beyond Grade 8 or its age equivalent and is determined by an IEP team to have developed appropriate skills to enter the world of work, act responsibly as a citizen, and enjoy a fulfilling life, or (b) enrolled in an education program for four years beyond Grade 8 or its age equivalent and have reached age 21.

Students with disabilities on track to earn a high school certificate are often served in special education programs that deliver the Fundamental Life Skills Curriculum and include work and training opportunities. For example, MCPS School/Community-Based Services programs provide secondary students with pre-work and pre-vocational training, as appropriate, in a variety of natural

²⁴ See <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council/olo/reports/pdf/2009-10.pdf>

settings. Secondary students enrolled in Autism and Learning for Independence classes, and special schools (e.g., Rock Terrace) also receive pre-vocational training as part of their curriculum.

Certificate-bound students with disabilities typically begin their readiness for work training with classroom instruction to improve their workplace social skills. These pre-vocational experiences are often followed by in-school work experiences such as staffing a school store or running a coffee business. As students complete their tenure with MCPS, they can also be placed in an array of outside work experiences, ranging from supported employment positions with a job coach to fully independent, paid job placements.

MCPS works with the business community to provide high school students with disabilities both paid and unpaid work experiences in many different occupations. A MCPS staff team collaborates with an employer to coordinate placement, training, and support services for students in the workplace. The intent of these experiences is to develop marketable job skills, increased independence, and community involvement to prepare students to meet the demands of the workforce after graduation.

The number of certificate-bound secondary students with disabilities receiving work/training experiences and their costs are difficult to isolate from special education enrollment and program costs overall. OLO's estimate of FY08 per student transition service costs for all high school students with disabilities, not just students with disabilities on track to earn a certificate, was \$1,062 per student.²⁵ OLO's estimate of 2010-11 per student costs of special education placements for programs aligned with the Fundamental Life Skills curriculum ranges from \$30,000 to \$33,000.²⁶

Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement. The Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement (SEPA) program provides career-based instructional for Spanish speaking high school ESOL students with little or no formal education. This program targets 18-21 year old Spanish speaking students who are not likely to meet MCPS graduation requirements by age 21. The program focuses on developing entry-level job skills as well as English language, mathematics, and literacy skills through classroom and hands-on instruction. Students are referred to the program by an ESOL teacher and must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Be a native Spanish speaker;
- Be at least 18 years old by June 30 of the year enrolled;
- Demonstrate limited academic progress;
- Demonstrate an overall beginning level of English language proficiency; and
- Demonstrate reading skills below Grade 3 in English, mathematics skills below Grade 5, and limited reading comprehension skills in Spanish.

The SEPA program is designed as a two-year program and includes five components:

- During the summer before the school year begins, students participate in a free four-week Summer Career Exploration Program at Edison. The program introduces students to the career and technology education courses that will be available to them at Edison.
- During the school year, students attend their home school for half of the school day and take courses at Edison for the remainder of the day. SEPA students choose from four career pathways: Foundations in Automotive Technology; Construction trades pathways in

²⁵ See page 54 of OLO Report 2009-10

²⁶ See Table 9 of OLO Report 2012-3

Carpentry, Plumbing, and Masonry; Nail Technology; and Professional Restaurant Management. During the first year, students also take a SEPA ESOL course at Edison and in the second year they take College/Career Research and Development.

- Students participate in courses at their home high school that focus on English language development in reading and mathematics.
- SEPA students also work with an ESOL counselor and ESOL community coordinator who assist students and their families with access to social and academic services that address barriers to learning.
- After the first year of the program, students may participate in a work-based internship.

A 2010 evaluation by the Office of Shared Accountability describes the performance of the SEPA program and demonstrates some of the program's challenges. Overall, data demonstrate that students and parents had a positive perception of the program. Staff felt the program was beneficial, but they also recognized program challenges and limitations (i.e., attendance issues and the inability to meet the needs of all students).

The evaluation also considered the impact of the program on academic performance. Key findings for students who completed the SEPA program in FY09 and FY10 were:

- Half or fewer earned a grade of C or better in their mathematics course in either semester;
- About two-thirds earned a C or better in their ESOL classes by the end of the school year; and
- Nearly all students (100% in FY09 and 92% in FY10) earned a C or better in their CTE course at the end of the year. Moreover, over two-thirds of FY09 students and more than half of FY10 students earned an A or B in their career course at the end of the year.

In recent years, access to SEPA has expanded to all eligible students in MCPS, not just students at Wheaton and Einstein where the program was first initiated in FY08. In FY09, OLO's estimate of per student costs for SEPA ranged from \$16,500 to \$28,000 based on services available at that time for an enrollment of 20-28 students.²⁷

E. Other County-Funded Programs Inclusive of Dropout Prevention and Recovery Services

This section describes other dropout prevention and recovery programs funded by Montgomery County agencies other than MCPS. This description includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) funded youth development programs that offer dropout prevention and recovery services but focus on other priorities for at-risk youth such as gang prevention and intervention.

Seven County-funded programs are listed in Table 9 and described in detail on the next page. The St Luke's, Conservation Corps, Youth Opportunities Centers, and Maryland Multicultural Youth Center programs are each administered by non-profit agencies under contract to DHHS. In addition, this section describes the federally-funded Early Head Start program operated by Family Services, Inc. that supports teen mothers who are trying to stay in school.

²⁷ See page 61 of OLO Report 2009-10

Overall, 950 youth and adults were served by seven County-sponsored dropout prevention and recovery programs in FY11.²⁸ It is unclear whether the County’s supply of dropout prevention and recovery programs meets the demand for such services.

The combined cost of these programs totaled nearly \$2.6 million in FY11 with a per participant cost ranging from a low of \$390 per participant in the GED program at Montgomery College to a high of \$21,000 per participant in the Conservation Corps. The combined budget for these programs in FY12 is \$2.4 million – a 6.5% reduction from FY11.

Table 9: County-Funded Dropout Recovery and Prevention Programs

Program	FY11 Number Served	FY11 Budget	FY12 Approved Budget
Gateway to College	141	\$925,359	\$947,535
GED Program at Montgomery College	127	\$49,488	\$58,574
St. Luke’s House Career Transition Program*	89	\$126,842	\$127,672
Conservation Corps*	19	\$400,000	\$200,000
Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center*	308	\$502,477	\$502,477
Upcounty Youth Opportunity Center*	101	\$450,000	\$450,000
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center*	165	\$133,000	\$133,000
Total	950	\$2,587,166	\$2,419,258
*Programs funded by DHHS under contract			

Gateway to College. This program is located at Montgomery College and serves current or former MCPS students who have dropped out. Students who are accepted into the program earn high school credits to complete their diploma while also receiving college credits. Criteria for students to apply for acceptance into this program include being between the ages of 16 and 20, prior enrollment in MCPS for at least one semester, having a 10th grade reading level, and submitting all required paperwork for admittance, including essays.

Students can remain at Gateway to College to earn credits needed for their high school diploma until the age of 21; they can remain at Montgomery College longer to earn their associate’s degree. Students must complete a first semester of courses in English, reading, math, career development, and college success. Following that semester, students enroll in the appropriate courses to meet their diploma and college goals. Students receive support from a resource specialist to address enrollment, referrals for academic and other support services, and personal counseling and guidance.²⁹

The program began in 2004, and to date 830 students have been or are currently enrolled in the program. In all, 105 students have earned their MCPS high school diploma through this program. On average, program completers earn 53 credits and finish with a Montgomery College GPA of 2.7. Last year (FY11), 141 students participated in the program at a total cost of \$925,000 or a per student cost of \$6,563.³⁰

²⁸ The Sharp Suspension program is excluded from this analysis due to its limited scope.

²⁹ <http://cms.montgomerycollege.edu/edu/departments.aspx?id=23869>

³⁰ Communication with Donna Dimon and Elena Saenz, Montgomery College, November 2011

GED Program at Montgomery College. This program serves persons age 16 or older who need to complete the equivalent of their high school diploma. Students may not be simultaneously enrolled in this program and in high school. The program offers placement testing, GED preparation classes, GED testing, and post-secondary transition support. Students must pay tuition for the program. Of note, this program has carried a waitlist for several years; mid-way through FY12 the waitlist for the program was 112 students. On average from FY09 – FY11, approximately 32 percent of GED-level participants were age 16 – 18 and about 31 percent of students were age 19 – 24.³¹ In FY11, the program served 127 students with a budget of \$52,700 or a per student cost of \$392.³²

St. Luke’s House Career Transition Program. This program funded by DHHS provides assistance to youth with serious emotional disturbances to help them transition from high school to college, vocational school, or other post-secondary goals. The program is available to 11th and 12th grade students and offers a combination of mental health and career/vocational resources, including career education, job placement, family resources, and identification of supplementary resources. In FY11, the program served 89 youth at a cost of \$127,000 or a per student cost of \$1,425.³³

Conservation Corps. This program operated by DHHS serves youth age 17 – 25 who are not in school and are unemployed. The program provides job training and experience in conservation, carpentry, wood working, and landscaping. The program also confers benefits to the public via the conservation, carpentry, and landscaping projects completed on public property. Participants are paid an hourly wage, receive weekly GED and computer literacy instruction, and have the opportunity to earn scholarships for post-secondary education.³⁴

In FY11, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) operated the program through October 15, 2010, serving 19 participants at a cost of \$400,000 and per participant cost of \$21,052. In FY10, the program served 58 participants with a budget of \$856,700 for a per student cost of \$14,500. In FY12, the program has a budget of \$200,000 although it is not currently operating. DHHS currently is working to develop a contract with the Montgomery County Collaboration Council to solicit proposals from qualified vendors to operate the program.³⁵

Youth Opportunity Centers (YOC). The Crossroads Youth Opportunity Centers (in Takoma Park) and the Upcounty Youth Opportunity Center (located in Gaithersburg), funded by DHHS and operated by Identity, Inc. provide a wide variety of services to at-risk youth, including some dropout prevention and recovery programs. Services include case management, mental health services, GED preparation, workforce services, recreation, and positive youth development programs. The Youth Opportunity Centers serve youth ages 17 – 24. In FY11, the Crossroads YOC served 308 youth for \$502,000 for a per participant cost of \$1,631; the Upcounty YOC served 101 youth for \$450,000 or a per participant cost of \$4,453.³⁶

³¹ Yao, February 1, 2011

³² Communication with Donna Kinerney, Montgomery College, December 2011

³³ <http://stlukeshouse.org/program/youth-career-transition>, Yao, February 1, 2011

³⁴ <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/hhstmpl.asp?url=/content/hhs/cyf/mccc/index.asp>

³⁵ Communication with Kate Garvey, DHHS, December 2011

³⁶ Yao, February 1, 2011; Communication with Kate Garvey, DHHS, December 2011

Maryland Multicultural Youth Center/Latin American Youth Center (MMYC/LAYC). With funding by DHHS, the MMYC/LAYC provides GED preparation and job readiness programming for at-risk Latino youth in Montgomery County. Program participants are age 17 and older. In FY11 the program served 165 youth at a cost of \$133,000 or a per participant cost of \$806.³⁷

Early Head Start. The Early Head Start Program at Gaithersburg and Watkins Mills high schools operated by Family Services, Inc. provides services that help teen mothers stay in school. The program has two components – home visiting and a child development center that serves teen mothers and other low-income families. The child development center serves up to 28 children.

Currently, Family Services transports teen mothers and their children from their homes to the Family Services Gaithersburg Center where they participate in a child development class. After the class, MCPS buses them to school for the remainder of the school day. After school, MCPS brings them back to the center, the mothers pick up their children, and Family Services transports them home. Family Services has a memorandum of understanding with the two participating high schools for students to participate in this program and receive transportation. The program is funded through the federal Early Head Start program.³⁸

³⁷ <http://www.layc-dc.org/index.php/md-programs.html>, Communication with Kate Garvey, DHHS, December 2011

³⁸ Communication with Meredith Myers, Family Services, Inc., November 2011

Chapter V: Best Practices in Alternative Education

This chapter synthesizes the best practices research literature in several areas related to alternative education and improving graduation rates, including best practices for:

- Engaging and motivating secondary students to learn;
- Alternative programs and schools;
- Dropout prevention and recovery programs; and
- Career and technical education programs.

This chapter also examines the alignment between best practices and County-funded alternative education programs. Several findings emerge from the information reviewed in this chapter:

1. Empirical research on best practices in alternative education is limited; much of what has been described as best practices has not been empirically evaluated.
2. Research on student engagement identifies three best practices for motivating students to succeed in school: enhancing the rigor of curriculum and instruction, enhancing the relevance of curriculum and instruction, and enhancing relationships that foster student success.
3. Enhancing the rigor of the curriculum requires coupling high standards and expectations with high levels of support to enable all students to succeed.
4. Enhancing the relevance of schooling requires that curriculum and instruction respond to and reflect students' current interests and their long-term goals.
5. Fostering relationships to motivate students to succeed requires practices that connect students to their schools and communities.
6. Best practices for alternative programs and schools, dropout prevention and recovery, and career and technical education programs mirror best practices for enhancing student engagement because they promote rigor, relevance, and relationships.
7. MCPS' alternative programs and schools and career and technical education (CTE) programs for the most part align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. Exceptions to this pattern include a lack of clarity on whether MCPS' Alternative II and III programs promote relevance and the exclusion of most students at risk from CTE programs.
8. MCPS other dropout prevention and recovery programs do not offer a comprehensive approach to promoting student engagement. These programs most often focus on providing high risk students with supports to reach rigorous standards (i.e., credit recovery classes) but ignore the value of the relevance and relationship constructs as effective strategies for engaging high risk students.
9. Montgomery College and non-profit organizations contract with DHHS to offer a range of additional dropout prevention and recovery programs. The most comprehensive programs align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework while the least comprehensive programs focus almost exclusively on students completing the GED.

A. Best Practices for Engaging and Motivating Students to Learn

In 2003, the National Research Council (NRC) published a report describing how schools can foster high school students' motivation to learn. They note the following:¹

Engaging adolescents cognitively and emotionally in school and academic work is a challenge regardless of the socio or economic status of the students and the location of their schools. Adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers' demands mindlessly, and many are too young, inexperienced, or uninformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school. Academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school, and disengagement from coursework is common at the high school level (p. 211).

The NRC report also notes that “dropping out of school is but the most visible indication of pervasive disengagement from the academic purposes ... of schools. Many of the students who do not drop out altogether attend irregularly, exert little or ineffective effort on schoolwork, and learn little” (p. 212).

Based on a review of psychological research on motivation and studies of the effects of various educational policies and practices on student engagement, and students' own voices, the NRC found that schools can improve student motivation through three best practices:

- Schools can enhance the **rigor** of their curriculum and instruction by promoting high standards and expectations for student performance and providing extensive support to enable all students to reach high standards
- Schools can enhance the **relevance** of their curriculum and instruction to students' interests by demonstrating how students will use their learning to meet their long-term goals, including their career goals.
- Schools can enhance the **relationships** that support student learning by improving students' connections to their schools and the larger community and social environment.

Exhibit 7 on the next page describes the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework for schools to improve student engagement and provides a few examples aligned with each key program feature.

¹ National Research Council, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2003.

Exhibit 7: Best Practices to Engage Students

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Examples of Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality instruction • High expectations for students
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective classroom management • Social skills instruction • Summer school • Tutoring
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice for students • Active, hands on learning • Flexibility
	Reflects students' long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on career and college readiness • Career and technical education • Service learning/internships • AP/IB/early college experiences
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized instruction • Small schools • Small class size • Mentors
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Collaboration with other agencies
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council (2003)		

B. Best Practices in Alternative Programs and Schools

Although the research base is thin, the following characteristics of effective alternative programs and schools are frequently cited in the literature. Researchers note, however, that many if not most of these characteristics are in need of empirical study because it is unclear whether these characteristics produce positive results or simply correlate with positive outcomes.² These characteristics also overlap with best practices for serving students with disabilities in alternative programs and schools with such schools often have a stronger focus on improving student behavior.³

- High-quality academic instruction;
- High expectations/belief in the student;
- Effective classroom management;
- Positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management;
- Special teacher training;
- Choice for students and staff;
- Flexibility within a highly structured environment;
- Small class size and small student body;
- Personalized school environment in which students feel included in decision making;
- Parent involvement; and
- Collaboration among internal staff and with other human service agencies.

² Quinn and Poirier, 2007.

³ Tobin and Sprague, 1999.

The best practices identified for alternative programs and schools align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework described in Exhibit 8 below. Overall, these best practices emphasize the importance of students fostering relationships with schools, parents, and service agencies and schools utilizing extensive classroom and behavior management approaches to enable students to reach high standards and expectations. None of the best practices noted, however, appear to align with students’ long-term goals (such as readiness for a career or post-secondary education). This may occur in part because the focus of many alternative programs and schools is to return students to comprehensive schools that can support their long-term goals.

Exhibit 8: Best Practices for Alternative Programs and Schools

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Alternative Programs and Schools Best Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality instruction • High expectations for students • Special teacher training
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective classroom management • Social skills instruction • Positive emphasis in behavior management
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice for students • Flexibility
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized environment and instruction • Small schools • Small class size • Mentors
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Collaboration with other agencies
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council (2003), Quinn and Poirer (2006), Aron (2006), Lange and Sletten (2002), and Maryland State Department of Education (2000)		

C. Best Practices in Dropout Prevention and Recovery

Dropout Prevention Best Practices: The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University describes hundreds of dropout prevention programs in its online database as “model programs” that reduce student dropout rates by targeting student attendance, engagement, learning, and non-school barriers that contribute to students dropping out. However, only a few of these programs have been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness with an evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education’s School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP) noting that “most programs made almost no difference in preventing dropping out in general.”⁴

⁴ Mark Dynarski and Philip Gleason cited in Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009.

Of the 10 SDDAP programs evaluated, five showed promise in reducing dropout rates, but two of the five programs are no longer active. The three remaining positive programs represent three distinct approaches to alternative education programs aimed at dropout prevention, with two of them emphasizing CTE as a major feature of their programs. A summary of these three programs from the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse follows.

- **Check and Connect**⁵ focuses on working with and coordinating services among families, schools, and the community to help high school students succeed and stay in school. The program assigns each student a mentor who also serves as a case worker for a minimum two year commitment, even if the student moves to another school. One evaluation of this program found a 21 percentage point reduction in 9th grade dropout rates between Check and Connect participants and a control group. Another study showed that 39 percent of Check and Connect participants had dropped out by the expected graduation year compared with 58 percent of the control group. Estimated costs in 2001-02 were \$1,400 per student.
- **Career Academies**⁶ operate as career-focused small learning communities within schools where students have the same teachers over three to four years. Career Academies provide integrated academic and vocational coursework and use partnerships with local employers to build links between school and work and to provide students with work-based learning opportunities. An experimental evaluation found that among high risk youth, the career academies reduced the baseline dropout rate of 32 percent by 11 percentage points and that in the students' projected 12th grade year, 40% of the high risk students has earned enough credits to graduate compared with only 26% of students in the control group. In 2004, per student costs of this model were \$600 more than non-academy student costs.
- **Talent Development High Schools**⁷ (TDHS) are high school reforms that feature small learning communities, efforts to increase parent and community involvement, and a curriculum designed to prepare all students for high-level English and math courses. A quasi-experimental evaluation of the program that followed 20 cohorts of 9th graders for four years in Philadelphia found that 68% of students in TDHS schools were promoted to 10th grade compared with 60% of students in the comparison group. The added cost of this program is about \$350 per student per year.

These three effective programs utilize three distinct approaches to reducing dropout prevention:

- Check and Connect focuses additional resources intensively on a targeted group of students with identified needs;
- Career Academies focus on changing the school experience for students at-risk with smaller learning communities to improve student engagement and learning; and
- Talent Development High Schools utilize broader, more universal school reforms to improve engagement and learning among all students that in turn lowers dropout rates.

⁵ What Works Clearinghouse, September 2006.

⁶ What Works Clearinghouse, October 2006.

⁷ What Works Clearinghouse, July 2007.

Tyler and Lofstrom identify five best practices among these three programs that also align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework:

1. Curricular reforms with an emphasis on gaining proficiency in English and math (rigor);
2. Attention to student’s out of school problems that affect attendance, behavior, and performance (rigor);
3. Curricular reforms that focus on either career-oriented or experiential approach (relevance);
4. Close mentoring and monitoring of students (relationships); and
5. Case management of individual students (relationships).

The U.S. Department of Education has developed a similar list of best practices for implementing dropout reduction strategies based on the What Works Clearinghouse’s review of the SSDAP studies and programs recognized as effective. Exhibit 9 describes the best practices published in the Department’s practice guide for implementing effective dropout reduction strategies.⁸

Exhibit 9: Recommendations for Preventing Dropouts

Category	Specific Recommendation	Rationale
School-wide Interventions	Better engage students through rigorous and relevant instruction to equip them with skills needed to graduate.	Increase engagement by providing students with skills to finish high school and by showing students post-secondary options.
	Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.	Personalized environments create a sense of belonging and foster a climate where students and teachers know each other; provide academic, social, and behavioral support.
Diagnostic	Use data to realistically diagnose the number of dropouts and to identify students at high risk of dropping out.	Regularly review data on student absences, grade retention, and academic achievement with an emphasis on the transition to middle school from high school.
Targeted Interventions	Improve academic performance through academic support and enrichment.	Help students improve academic performance and reengage in school. Implement in conjunction with other recommendations.
	Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills.	Use attainable academic and behavioral goals and recognize students for accomplishment. Teach problem-solving and decision-making strategies. Partner with agencies to provide supports that address external social and behavioral factors.
	Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.	Use adult advocates with appropriate backgrounds and low caseloads, and purposefully match them with students. Provide adequate training and support to advocates.

Source: Dynarski, M. et, al (2008)

⁸ Dynarski, M., et al, 2008.

The Department’s guide for effective dropout prevention strategies also aligns with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework. As noted in Exhibit 10, the guide encourages schools to adopt high standards and supports for reaching those standards, relevant curriculum and instructional approaches, and strategies that personalize the learning environment. However, the Department’s guide advises that schools first focus on delivering rigorous and relevant instruction and a personalized learning environment school-wide before delivering more targeted academic and behavior supports to students identified by a review of the data as being at high risk of dropping out.

Exhibit 10: Best Practices for Dropout Prevention

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Dropout Prevention Best Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous academic instruction (school-wide).
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic, social, and behavioral support (school-wide) • More intensive support for students identified by early warning system (targeted).
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant academic instruction school wide (school-wide).
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum and instruction show students post-secondary options (school-wide).
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized learning environment (school-wide) • Mentors/case management for students identified by early warning system (targeted).
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with other agencies to provide supports that address external factors for students identified by early warning system (targeted).
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by Dynarski et al. (2008)		

Dropout Recovery Programs: Dropout recovery programs, also known as “second chance” programs that provide multiple pathways to graduation, aim to reengage students who have dropped out of school to earn a high school diploma or credential. Dropout recovery programs vary in structure and can be sponsored by:⁹

- Traditional public schools;
- Specially created recovery focused schools;
- Alternative learning centers;
- Community-based non-profit schools and programs;
- For-profit schools;
- Federal, state, and county-funded efforts;
- Community colleges;
- Adult education system; and
- Other social service providers.

⁹ Tyler and Lofstrom, 2009.

Although about a third of young persons drop out of school and could benefit from multiple pathways to earning a high school credential, researchers know little about best practices for recovering dropouts.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is some evidence that such programs can improve the educational attainment of high school dropouts.

For example, the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse found that the federally-funded Job Corps Program has been successful at increasing GED attainment rates among young persons who entered the program without a high school credential.¹¹ Job Corps provides services to youth ages 16-24 at a cost of about \$20,000 per participant.¹² The core services of Job Corps – academic instruction, vocational training, and residential services - also align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework suggesting that a focus on improving student engagement serve as best practices for dropout recovery programs as well.

D. Best Practices in Career and Technical Education

Career and technical education (CTE) has undergone a significant transformation, moving from vocational education or “education for work” to the more academically rigorous model of “education through work” that promotes both college and career readiness.¹³ Research on the former CTE model (i.e. education for work) indicates that CTE course taking is associated with improved rates of staying in school, graduating, working, and earnings among at-risk students.¹⁴ Research regarding the impact of the new CTE model (i.e., education through work) is still emerging. Yet, there is, some consensus among researchers on best practices for promoting CTE programs focused on career and college readiness that are summarized below.¹⁵ Several of these best practices are embedded in the Talent Development and Career Academy models that have been recognized as effective dropout prevention programs.¹⁶ Additional research is warranted to understand the impact of these practices.

- **Integrated technical and academic content.** An often cited ACT study¹⁷ finds the need for comparable mathematics and reading skills among students entering college or workforce training programs. Given these common requirements, CTE programs have begun to overhaul their curriculum to integrate technical and academic content. For example, an automotive mechanics class may teach the physics of power generation, wind resistance and engine efficiency in addition to teaching the mechanics of how a car runs.¹⁸ The integrated delivery of academic and CTE content often requires changes in instructional staffing, training, and school scheduling. For example, the High Schools that Work (HSTW) model encourages academic and CTE teachers to work together to plan and deliver integrated academic and CTE instruction, particularly for interdisciplinary projects.¹⁹ And both HSTW and TDHS have utilized block scheduling (90 minute classes) to increase teacher planning time and student and teacher interactions during lessons.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ What Works Clearinghouse, April 2008.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kazis, 2005.

¹⁴ Kazis, 2005; Wonnacott, 2002; and Agodini and Deke, 2004.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ What Works Clearinghouse, October 2006 and July 2007.

¹⁷ Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different? 2006.

¹⁸ Brand, 2005.

¹⁹ See http://publications.sreb.org/2011/HSTW_KeyPractices_11x17Poster_Fill-In.pdf.

- **Multiple opportunities to learn and advance.** The increasing rigor of CTE means that at-risk students previously tracked into vocational education will need opportunities to improve their academic skills to access and succeed in today's CTE programs. TDHS offers targeted courses for students who enter high school with weak academic skills aimed at improving their ability to access CTE course beginning in Grade 10. Additionally, many TDHS campuses offer extended learning opportunities for students who are not succeeding in traditional classrooms or for those with special schedule needs. Examples include flex-school, Saturday School, or Twilight schools as alternative programs.
- **Dual credit and credentialing opportunities.** CTE programs increasingly focus on providing students dual credit opportunities to simultaneously earn high school and college credits. CTE programs also often offer students opportunities to earn occupational credential. Ideally, credentials earned should reflect skills and occupations that are in demand and anticipated to grow in the future. Enabling students to earn credentials requires an alignment among CTE, industry, occupational, and post-secondary standards.
- **Active and interactive instruction.** CTE programs characterized by interactive, hands-on instruction are thought to often motivate students, particularly at-risk students, to persevere and complete high school. According to TDHS model, active and interactive instruction is often characterized by classrooms where students and teachers work collaboratively on lessons that enable students to connect content to real-world experiences through problem-solving and a "learn by doing" approach.
- **Small learning communities.** Smaller learning communities have been identified as a best practice for supporting secondary school reform and CTE.²⁰ These include career academies which function as career-themed small learning communities within a larger high school. Career academies seek to integrate academic and technical instruction, provide work-based learning opportunities, and prepare students for jobs and postsecondary education. Schools organized around career academies in the upper grades often also use small learning communities for ninth-graders to support the transition to high school and bolster the academic skills of freshman to be able to access rigorous CTE curricula later in high school.
- **Connections with businesses, higher education, and communities.** Connections between schools and local businesses foster personal ties between employers and students that can improve employment prospects for youth.²¹ Work-based learning also helps students to acquire occupational knowledge and skills, engage in career planning and explore careers, improve work-related personal and social competence, and increase motivation and academic achievement. Connections with higher education also assist the transitions for CTE students entering technical, two-year, and four-year colleges. Further, connections among students, families, counseling, and social services are also essential to ensuring the non-academic needs of students in CTE programs are met.

As noted in Exhibit 11 on the next page, best practices in CTE squarely align with the student engagement framework. More specifically, the integration of CTE and academic standards coupled with multiple opportunities for students to learn and advance supports rigor; active and interactive instruction that prepares students for careers and college supports relevance; and the use of smaller learning communities and partnerships with business and higher education fosters relationships.

²⁰ Kazis, 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

Exhibit 11: Best Practices for Career and Technical Education Programs

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	CTE Best Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate CTE and academic standards.
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple opportunities to learn and advance.
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active and interactive instruction.
	Reflects students' long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dual credit and credentialing. Focus on career and college readiness.
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smaller learning communities.
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connections to higher education and business community.
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council (2003); Kazis (2005); What Works Clearinghouse (October 2006 & July 2007), Talent Development High Schools, and Wonnacott (2002).		

E. Montgomery County Programs and Alternative Education Best Practices

A review of the literature on alternative programs and schools, dropout prevention and recovery programs, and career and technical education confirms that the best practices identified by researchers in these program areas aligns with the rigor, relevance, and relationship framework for promoting student engagement endorsed by the National Research Council. This section compares the key features of each local alternative education program to the student engagement framework.

MCPS Alternative Programs and Schools including RICA: As detailed in Chapter IV, MCPS operates three types of alternative programs and schools aimed at supporting the achievement of students at high risk for dropping out of school:

- Alternative I programs in comprehensive secondary schools;
- Alternative II and III programs that operates in separate schools; and
- RICA, a separate special education school that primarily serves students with emotional disabilities.

Exhibit 12 on the next page compares the key features of these three programs to the student engagement framework. Among the three, RICA offers the strongest alignment to the framework, followed by the Alternative II and III programs, and then Alternative I programs. Each of these programs provide supports for students to meet high academic standards and fostering relationships between schools, parents, and other agencies. It is unclear, however, whether any of MCPS' alternative programs employ practices that support students' long-term career interests.

It is important to note that the Alternative I program is more of a set of strategies than a program and that the focus of the Alternative I, II, and III programs is to return students back to their home school programs that may more strongly align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework.

Chart 8: Best Practices and MCPS Alternative Education Programs

Best Practices to Engage Students		Features of MCPS Alternative Education Programs		
Best Practice	Practice Features	Alternative I	Alternative II & III	RICA
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MCPS Curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MCPS Curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MCPS Curriculum
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource classes Social skills instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic & behavior supports Mental health services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic and behavior management Mental health services
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project-based experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive curriculum
	Reflects students' long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College preparedness Goal setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College preparedness Transition services
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small class size Mentors Case management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small class size Small school Case management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small class size Small school Case management
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration with agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration with agencies Family therapy (DHMH)

Source: OLO

Other MCPS Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs: MCPS operates three dropout prevention and recovery programs beyond its alternative programs and schools:

- High School Plus that offers credit-recovery within comprehensive high schools;
- Online Pathway to College that offers current and former MCPS students up to three recovery credits needed for graduation on-line; and
- Summer School that also provides opportunities for students to earn recovery credits.

For the most part, MCPS' dropout prevention and recovery programs focus exclusively on enhancing the rigor of curriculum and instruction by providing current (and a few former) students additional opportunities to master course content and earn credits toward graduation. Each of the programs focus on providing high risk students instructional opportunities to enable them to graduate (i.e., credit recovery or in-home instruction/tutoring). However, none of the programs employ practices aimed at enhancing the relevance of curriculum and instruction beyond college preparedness or fostering relationships among students, schools, and communities.

Like MCPS' alternative programs, the focus of these initiatives is to enable students to fully access the opportunities available at the home campus that may align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework. Exhibit 13 on the next page compares the features of these programs to the student engagement framework.

Exhibit 13: Best Practices and MCPS Dropout Prevention & Recovery Programs

Best Practices to Engage Students		Features of MCPS Dropout Prevention & Recovery Programs		
Best Practice	Practice Features	High School Plus	Online Pathway to Graduation	Summer School
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	• MCPS Curriculum	• MCPS Curriculum	• MCPS Curriculum
	Extensive supports	• Credit recovery	• Credit recovery	• Credit recovery
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests			
	Reflects students' long-term goals	• College readiness	• College readiness	• College readiness
Foster relationships	Connections to schools			
	Connections to community			
Source: OLO				

MCPS Career and Technology Education Programs: MCPS operates three types of career and technology education programs.

- CTE programs that focus on career and college readiness for grade level and above students;
- Vocational education for students with disabilities enrolled in the Fundamental Life Skills curriculum; and
- The SEPA program for secondary English language learners with interrupted educations.

Exhibit 14 compares the key features of these programs to the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework. For the most part, MCPS' CTE programs squarely align with best practices for enhancing student engagement. The only exception to this pattern is the absence of extensive supports to assist MCPS students pursuing career pathways to reach rigorous expectations for student performance.²² Conversely, MCPS' vocational education and SEPA programs employ extensive supports aimed at ensuring students reach high standards and expectations for performance.

²² MCPS notes, however, that through Perkins Funds, MCPS is able to allocate staffing for Career Student Support Teachers (CSSTs) at the most impacted schools. According to MCPS, CSSTs provide extensive support to students, especially under-represented or non-traditional students in the various programs of study.

Exhibit 14: Best Practices and MCPS Career and Technical Education Programs

Best Practices to Engage Students		Features of MCPS CTE Programs		
Best Practice	Practice Features	Career Pathways	Vocational Education	SEPA
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards & expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MCPS Curriculum Integrated academic and CTE content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fundamental Life Skills Curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modified curriculum Integrated academic and CTE content
	Extensive supports		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition planning Job coaching, shadowing, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literacy instruction Social services supports
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student choice Active instruction Internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School/community based learning Active instruction Internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student choice Active instruction
	Reflects students' long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on job & college readiness Dual credits & credentialing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on job readiness & self sufficiency Focus on employment post MCPS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on job readiness Focus on English proficiency
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small learning communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small class sizes School-based learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small class sizes
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships with business and higher education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental involvement Collaboration with business and adult agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental involvement Collaboration with business and service agencies

Source: OLO

Other County Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs: Montgomery County funds six prevention and recovery programs beyond the programs and services administered by MCPS.

- Gateway to College Program at Montgomery College that enables dropouts to complete their diploma and earn college credits;
- GED Program at Montgomery College that provides GED prep cohort classes, test administration and transition support;
- Youth Opportunities Centers (Crossroads and Upcounty) that provide GED classes and workforce, recreation, case management, and mental health services;
- Conservation Corps that provides GED preparation, job training, and stipends;
- Maryland Multicultural Youth Center/Latin American Youth Center that provides dropout prevention and recovery services that include GED preparation and job readiness training for at-risk Latino youth as part of a larger gang prevention program; and
- St. Luke's Career Transition Program for 11th and 12th grade students with emotional disabilities that provides mental health and career resources to support their transition.

The majority of these programs focus on re-engaging MCPS dropouts to earn their GED or to prepare for the workforce. Exhibit 15 compares the key features of these programs to the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework. Features of Gateway to College, Conservation Corps, and Youth Opportunity Centers most closely align with the best practices for supporting student engagement while the GED Program at Montgomery College, St. Luke’s Transition Center, and the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center/Latin American Youth Center (MMYC/LAYC) were not as closely aligned with the best practices.

Exhibit 15: Best Practices and Other Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs

Best Practices for Engaging Students		Features of Other Dropout Prevention & Recovery Programs		
Best Practice	Practice Features	Gateway to College	GED Program at Montgomery College	Youth Opportunity Centers
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diploma Associates Degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED attainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diploma GED attainment
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic supports Guidance counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED classes Mental health services
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student choice 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recreation
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation for college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation for post-secondary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce development
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Montgomery College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Montgomery College 	
	Connections to community			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case management
Best Practice	Practice Features	Conservation Corps	St Luke’s Transition Center	MMYC/LAYC Gang Prevention
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED attainment 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED attainment
	Extensive supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Computer literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED classes
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internship Stipend 		
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College and career readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job readiness
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarship opportunities 		
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job placements in community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job placements in community Family resources 	
Source: OLO				

Chapter VI: Lessons from Multiple Pathways to Graduation Efforts

Nationally, between 20-25% of students drop out of high school.¹ Montgomery County Public Schools generally has one of the highest graduation rates among comparably sized school systems. Yet, as described in Chapter II, about 15% of MCPS students do not graduate within four years with the highest dropout rates evident among students who are male, Latino, Black, low-income, have a disability, or are English language learners.

Multiple Pathways to Graduation refers to a comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery framework to increase graduation rates and connections to education and employment for youth. This chapter provides an overview of several jurisdictions that have used this framework to deliver and expand services for at-risk youth so they can earn their high school diploma.

This chapter is presented in three parts:

- **Part A, Background**, describes two foundation-funded efforts aimed at expanding the use of multiple pathways to prevent and recover dropouts;
- **Part B, Implementing Multiple Pathways**, describes common elements in how jurisdictions have implemented this approach; and
- **Part C, Lessons Learned for Improving Graduation Opportunities**, highlights several lessons learned from the multiple pathways approach to date.

Several findings emerge from the information reviewed:

- Most jurisdictions do not have specific policies or mandates to provide alternative pathways to graduation beyond their compulsory attendance laws.
- Implementing a coherent, alternative pathway approach to engage dropouts requires that youth serving organizations (governmental and community-based) partner together to develop a framework for providing services to reengage disconnected youth.
- Alternative pathways to graduation approaches often feature both an education and an occupational component.
- Key features of alternative pathways include “*on-ramps*” to programs for youth who detour from the traditional path, *customized services* to address non-academic barriers to success, and *a mix of schools and programs* that address the educational needs of disconnected youth.
- The leadership structure for implementing alternative pathways to graduation can vary with school systems, municipal offices, and/or community organizations taking the lead.
- Common elements in implementing multiple pathways to graduation include a focus on data, consideration of educational governance structures, service delivery models that align with student needs, and developing a portfolio of prevention, intervention, and recovery programs.
- Effective approaches assist students across the ability spectrum reach post-secondary goals (e.g. pre-GED, GED, and diploma students).
- Career and technical education/job training can serve as both a means and ends of the multiple pathways approach to improving local graduation rates.

¹ This is the percent of students who enter 8th grade and leave at some point as cited by Wald and Martinez, 2003.

A. Background

Most youth and young adults (ages 14-24) need support well into their twenties before they achieve self-sufficiency. Successful youth transitions into adulthood among students on track to graduate from high school on-time are supported by schools, families, and higher education.² In contrast, youth who drop out of school rarely have enough support to effectively transition into adulthood.³

Many services designed to help children, including free education, terminate when youth reach age 18. While some programs (such as job training) are available to those who seek them, typically funding and program slots are limited. And, unlike schools and child welfare agencies, no one institution or government agency is responsible for helping young adults make a successful transition to adulthood.

Within this context, some foundations have launched initiatives to address youth transitions to adulthood over the past decade. This section describes two initiatives that have informed several jurisdictions' efforts to expand their dropout prevention and recovery programs into frameworks that support multiple pathways to graduation.

“Connected by 25” Initiative. In 2001, several foundations established the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG), a collaborative effort that promoted a systematic approach to address outcomes for young adults.⁴ Three concerns motivated this initiative:

- Reduction in federal and state funding for youth employment programs;
- A growing gap in the availability of skilled workers able to fill technical jobs; and
- Lack of improvement in high school graduation rates despite education reforms focused on academic achievement and college readiness.

The Connected by 25 framework focuses on the following youth outcomes and guiding principles:⁵

- **Five outcomes** to help all youth be connected by age 25 and successful throughout life:
 - Educational achievement in preparation for career and community participation;
 - Gainful employment or access to career training to achieve life-long economic success;
 - Connection to a positive support system, e.g., guidance from family members and caring adults, as well as access to health, counseling and mental health services;
 - The ability to be a responsible and nurturing parent; and
 - The capacity to be actively engaged in the civic life of one's community.
- Utilization of **five principles** to shape policies/programs to address the needs of at-risk youth:
 - Youth development principles that recognize that development timelines are not fixed;
 - Data-driven assessments of system performance focused on early indicators of risk;

² Wald and Martinez, 2003.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sturgis, C. *Stemming the Tide*, 2008. Some of the Youth Transitions Funders Group's members include the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the William Penn Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

⁵ Youth Transition Funders Group. “Connected by 25: Effective Policy Solutions for Vulnerable Youth”, Spring 2010.

- Multiple pathways to success in the 21st century economy, including high school completion and post-secondary education, training and employment opportunities;
- Inclusion of transitional services in all public systems with outcomes and funding; and
- Reinforced connections in youth's lives with families, children and community/faith-based organizations.

To implement multiple pathways to success (Principle 3), YTFG articulated three related concepts:⁶

- **Adequate “On-Ramps.”** The concept that there is always another “on-ramp” for young people who detour from a traditional path lies at the center of the multiple pathways approach. Examples of such on-ramps include: increased availability of alternative schools for students in or out-of-school; expanded youth employment services; and transitional services in GED programs so that there are pathways to college.
- **Customized Services.** This concept recognizes that the challenges young people encounter can vary widely. Whereas some face burdens of poverty such as poor health, taking care of siblings, or the need to work, others must deal with threats of violence in their communities or homes. To respond appropriately, education and employment systems, including higher education, must be able to customize the types of supports and opportunities they provide to help all young people succeed.
- **Expanded Mix of Schools and Programs to Meet Educational Needs.** Historically, school systems' programs for disconnected youth have not adequately acknowledged the extent of their educational needs. For example, many of these young adults have elementary school literacy levels and significant gaps in foundational skills. As such, the GED, which is one of the core program elements for helping to reconnect youth, is not available to young people with less than eighth grade reading levels.

Alternative Pathways Project. In 2005, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Alternative Pathways Project: A Framework for Dropout Reduction and Recovery (“APP”). Many of the principles and components of APP mirrored those of the Connected by 25 Initiative. Exhibit 16 on the next page shows the alignment between these two approaches.⁷

Together, these two efforts helped launch the current focus on bolstering multiple pathways to graduation across several communities. More specifically, the Connected by 25 and Alternative Pathway Projects provided funding to community partnerships, including non-profit intermediaries and/or local school districts, for strategic assessments and program implementation. These initiatives also generated interest that led the Department of Labor to provide funding for a publicly supported multiple pathways program called the Blueprint Program.⁸

In all, three cities received funding from both the Connected by 25 and APP initiatives:

- Boston;
- New York; and
- Portland.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jobs for the Future, “The Ones We Lose” July 2005.

⁸ Jobs for the Future, “Multiple Education Pathways Blueprint Initiative” no date.

And the following cities received funding from one of these initiatives:

- Philadelphia (Connected by 25);
- San Jose (Connected by 25);
- Chicago (Alternative Pathways Project);
- Houston (Alternative Pathways Project); and
- Sacramento (Alternative Pathways Project).

Exhibit 16: Key Components of Multiple Pathway Frameworks

Key Strategies	Alternative Pathways Project Components	Connected by 25 Framework Components
Use data to inform decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Early Intervention</i> in two-steps: (1) an early warning system that tracks academic and behavioral indicators to identify at-risk students; and (2) immediate access to support programs to address individual student needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities work to improve the capacity to gather and use information to keep students on track, recuperate those that fall off-track, and recovering those students that disconnect.
Increase educational capacity and options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>An Adequate Supply of Choice-Based, High Quality Alternatives</i> with the mix and scale to serve all youth. • <i>The Ability to Refer, Transition and Re-enroll</i> so that schools are knowledgeable about available alternatives and make referrals; and students can re-enroll after an interruption in education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities increase the supply of quality educational options for off-track students, in and out-of-school.
Collaborate across institutions, sectors and organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Guidance and Advocacy</i> calls for a network of knowledgeable adults to guide youth, families, and advocates to help navigate public systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities build relationships with and mobilize the support of key partners and stakeholders.
Address policy barriers and funding constraints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Policy Incentives</i> that reward instructional improvement and encourage cross system collaboration, such as incentives to measure and fund learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities work to address the policy and funding environment at the local and state level to identify policy barriers that impede systemic and equitable schools reform for students off-track to graduation.
Source: OLO analysis of data from Jobs for the Future. “The Ones We Lose: Towards a Systemic Approach to High School Reform,” July2005.		

B. Implementing Multiple Pathways

The varying policy and resource contexts in each local district dictate a community’s approach to developing a multiple pathways framework to increase its students’ graduation rates. Nevertheless, some common implementation steps exist among most of the jurisdictions that have adopted this framework. This section describes common implementation strategies and concerns addressed by the jurisdictions affiliated with the Connected by 25 and Alternative Pathway Programs initiatives.

Use of Data to Support Start-up Activities. Localities frequently gathered data to help support their start-up activities. These data collections and reviews have centered on understanding the scope of the dropout problem, risk factors for dropping out, and the typical pathways taken by recent dropouts. The use of a segmentation analysis to understand patterns among off-track youth has also been a critical feature of many jurisdictions' start-up activities.

Segmentation studies can add value to start-up efforts because they enable districts to develop their own definitions of off-track students, to segment students based on these definitions, and to develop a responsive portfolio of programs and supports.⁹ Further, following a segmentation analysis, a district may enhance or redesign its data systems to more closely monitor student cohorts and to capture longitudinal data for students who are at-risk of falling off-track, who fall off-track, or who dropout.

Several examples of jurisdictions that have used data to support their start up efforts follow.

- **Portland:** The Portland Schools Foundation (a coalition of 37 community organizations) commissioned an analysis of dropout patterns and academic risk factors for the Class of 2004. These findings were shared with the Portland Public Schools (PPS) which in turn conducted its own analysis and found multiple 9th grade course failures to be the strongest predictor of dropping out. Based on this analysis, PPS focused on 8th and 9th grade achievement with a goal of transforming individual programs for 14-16 year olds into a complementary and effective network of services.
- **Boston:** As part of a coalition of 30 organizations, the Youth Transition Task Force (YTTF) released its report documenting the size and shape of Boston's dropout crisis and research on the social and fiscal cost of the crisis. To supplement this effort, the Boston Private Industry Council hired two former dropouts to reach out to youth to find out why they left schools and what happened when they tried to reconnect with their educational pathway. Boston Public Schools (BPS) also conducted a study of the educational trajectories of students who were not graduating and assessed the quality and funding of alternative schools. Working with YTTF, BPS also prepared a comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery plan.
- **New York:** The New York City Department of Education established an Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) and retained the Parthenon Group to complete an analysis of students who did not graduate. The study identified the "dropout population" (i.e., students at highest risk of dropping out) as over-age, under-credited youth and reported that half were in school and half were not. The Department of Education's strategic plan proposed a portfolio of schools and programs to serve over-age and under-credited youth. Because study data demonstrated the effectiveness of small transfer schools, the strategic plan was able to build on the New School Initiative launched by the Department in 2002.
- **Philadelphia:** Research by the Philadelphia Collaborative looked at students' educational trajectories across three systems: education, child welfare and juvenile justice. This research produced a multi-agency blueprint that recommended City departments institute better tracking and educational attainment supports for youth who and called for the development of a professional peer network for alternative education providers to improve their program capacity and effectiveness.

⁹ It is notable that the patterns among students who fall off-track vary from one district to the next. For example, New York City's analysis found that most students leave the system early; Portland's study showed students who fall behind in credits stay in school for several years before they drop out; and Boston's research found many dropouts were students who transferred into high school.

Consider Educational Governance Structures. To implement a multiple pathways to graduation approach, jurisdictions must consider the educational governance structures that will support implementation. The institutional arrangements that govern the multiple pathway efforts vary from district to district. A review of the multiple pathway sites for the YTFG by Jobs for the Future identifies three types of institutional arrangements: inside, blended and outside.¹⁰

- Under the **Inside** model, the school district takes lead responsibility for developing program options and/or the district contracts with providers to develop options. **Philadelphia** and **New York City** provide examples of this approach. All of these options, regardless of how they are developed or operated, belong to the districts' portfolio of options. As such, staff and leadership for each multiple pathway program have access to the same professional development, managerial training, and leadership development opportunities offered to other district high schools. Moreover, officials at these schools are actively involved in developing district initiatives such as changes in graduation requirements.

According to Jobs for the Future (JFF), pre-requisites for this approach are:

- A commitment to improving outcomes for off-track populations;
 - A dedicated high school reform office; and
 - An adequate supply of options or the capacity to develop and support new options for struggling students.
- Under the **Outside** model, a network of alternative schools is developed, supported, and managed by a Charter Management Organization (CMO). More specifically, a CMO receives a state charter to manage a group of charter schools. As such, it can provide fiscal and administrative support for a group of charter schools that deliver a portfolio of alternative education programs. **Chicago** is an example of this model.

The prerequisites to implement this model are:

- Strong state charter legislation;
 - Local capacity to develop schools; and
 - Entrepreneurial staff to raise funds to support and sustain the CMO.
- Under the **Blended** model, a group of organizations that advocate for community based, alternative education can form an outside network that partners with the district on programming and oversight. **Portland, Oregon** is an example of this approach. Networks can share resources, collaborate to raise funds, and advocate for the value of their programming.

JFF states that the key pre-requisites for this model to be successful are:

- An array of outside programs that have proven track records;
- Outside program advocates who can develop and sustain a network model and be open and transparent about their business practices; and
- District officials who are committed to serving the off-track population and knowledgeable about the community based programs.

¹⁰ Jobs for the Future, "Bringing Off-Track Youth into the Center of High School Reform" 2009.

Determine Service Delivery Models. Local school districts that are committed to providing services to support at-risk students must decide how they will organize service delivery to their at-risk students. A review of multiple pathway districts by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) suggests districts have followed three different service delivery models.

- Under the **Targeted Population** model, a district conducts a segmentation analysis to identify patterns among students who fall off-track, implements data systems to identify at-risk students who need support, and develops an array of special schools or instructional programs located within existing schools that are used to provide support targeted to the at-risk students. A district will continually assess and adjust its program offerings for how well they meet student needs and how effectively they help students graduate.
- Under the **District-wide** model, a district diversifies schools throughout the district instead of tailoring particular schools to the meet the needs of at-risk students. Since the goal is to ensure that every high school student can find a school that meets his needs, this model leads to the creation of many specialized programs. Like the Targeted model, a district uses its segmentation analysis to continuously identify at-risk students and advise them about program matches.
- Under the **Linked Learning** model, high schools are redesigned so that they can educate at-risk students in the same environment as other students. The Linked Learning model emphasizes work opportunities, hands-on projects, the involvement of career professionals, and career education aligned with local need.

CRPE notes that some districts such as **New York City** that started with a targeted population model have evolved into a district-wide model. Exhibit 17 summarizes the attributes that could help or hinder the success of each model.

Exhibit 17: Service Delivery Models for Implementing Multiple Pathways to Graduation

Models	Easier for districts with	More difficult for districts with...
Targeted Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to attain current data on true student dropout rates and risk factors (segmentation analysis). ▪ Alternative or pilot-type schools used to changing curriculum and direction as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor/no initial data on which students are at-risk. ▪ Difficulty getting current data on student performance.
Districtwide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large number of high schools to create many diverse options. ▪ Familiarity with multiple systems of accountability for different types of schools (charters, pilots, public, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limited system of transportation. ▪ Single system of accountability, i.e., only using annual yearly progress (AYP) instead of school-specific measures. ▪ Entrenched political opposition to major district reforms.
Linked Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ History of quality career and technical schools. ▪ Community/professional involvement in education. ▪ Strongly independent schools able to provide complex services internally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large number of students already out-of-school. ▪ Schools with high staff and administrative turnover.

Source: Marsh and Hill. "Multiple Pathways to Graduation: New Routes to High School Completion," University of Washington: Center on Reinventing Public Education, CRPE Working Paper #2010-2, May 2010.

Establishing Program Portfolios. The goal of the multiple pathways approach is for school districts to create a set of tools that high schools can use both to identify struggling students and, as importantly, to activate a quick, timely, individualized response. Since patterns among at-risk students vary, a district’s segmentation analysis and its enhanced student data system are important building blocks in a district’s design of its portfolio of programs. Exhibit 18 displays sample results of a segmentation analysis and illustrative program responses.

Exhibit 6-3: A Sample Portfolio of Options Designed for Specific Populations

Overage/Off-Track Students	Program Model Features
Ages 16 or older with enough credits/skill to graduate in three years	Academically rigorous diploma-granting high schools with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A personalized learning environment; • Rigorous academic standards; • Student centered pedagogy; • Acceleration strategies for academic catch-up; • Wraparound support to meet instructional/developmental goals; and • Clear pathways to college.
Who enter the school system during high school as English Language Learners	Academically rigorous diploma-granting high schools with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive remediation and language –acquisition; • Academic and youth development supports in core content areas; • Extended day and calendar; and • Connection to internships and college-readiness opportunities.
Ages 17 or older, with enough skills/credits to graduate in one year.*	Flexible programming to allow students to make up credits quickly while gaining skills for the transition to postsecondary learning. Additional features include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdisciplinary curricula that meet multiple credit requirements and/or self-paced academic work in needed credit areas; • Wraparound supports to meet instructional/developmental goals; and • Focus on connections to college.
Ages 17 or older, with few credits/low skills, and an eighth-grade reading level	GED-granting programs with clear pathways/interim benchmarks through community college, featuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive literacy across the curriculum; • Student centered pedagogy; • Clear systems for ongoing assessment; • Pathways to post-secondary training/learning; and • In-depth, sector-specific career exploration.
Ages 17 or older, with a below-eighth-grade reading level	Pre-GED program with wraparound supports and clear pathways/interim benchmarks toward GED program entry, featuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive focus on literacy; • Student-centered pedagogy; • Clear systems for ongoing assessment; • Employment-readiness programming; and • In-depth, sector-specific career exploration.
Note: *While most 17 year olds are within a year of graduation, analyses in Boston and New York City point to a significant population of 17-year-old seniors who are not likely to graduate with a typical course sequence and instead need a more customized sequence because of missing credits and/or challenging life circumstances. This chart is adapted from Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (New York City Department of Education), the Boston Public Schools (the Parthenon Group) and the Youth Development Institute materials. Source: JFF, Bringing Off-Track Youth into the Center of High School Reform, p. 62.	

Typically, jurisdictions develop their portfolio of programs across two program types to target services for struggling students based on where the students have fallen off track.

- **Prevention/Intervention Programs.** These programs can be targeted or school/district-wide interventions focused on enhancing the capacity of schools to prevent students from falling off-track. Examples of these options are bridge programs, high school orientation programs, attendance monitoring strategies and literacy programs. The goal is to increase the graduation rate by reducing the number of off-track students.
- **Recuperation/Recovery Programs.** These programs expand the array of programs for students who have fallen behind or dropped out. Credit-recovery programs, transfer schools (analogous to alternative schools), twilight schools (that offer afternoon credit-recovery classes) and other approaches create multiple re-entry points to re-engage and reconnect students. The goal is to increase the graduation rate by recapturing disconnected students.

Multiple Pathways Education Options Case Studies. The profiles that follow describe the educational program options for struggling secondary students in Chicago, New York City and Philadelphia because they have been recognized by the Connected by 25 Initiative (YTFG) for their exemplary work in implementing the multiple pathways to graduation framework. Together, these profiles demonstrate that each community relies on a combination of dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery programs to meet the needs of struggling learners in and out-of-school.

Exhibit 19: Multiple Pathways Education Options in Chicago

Prevention/Intervention Programs	Recuperation/Recovery Programs
Chicago Educational Program Options	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Learning Communities (SLC) that are designed to support teacher student connectedness. The goals are to improve freshman on track rates, raise attendance rates, increase student engagement, increase participation in extra-curricular activities, and improve student climate. There are no pre-requisite requirements for enrolling; however SLCs are available at a subset of high schools through a selective enrollment process. • Achievement Academies are two-year programs that serve students ages 15 and over who have not met the promotion criteria to enter high school. The academies provide a positive school environment, collaborative team teaching, ongoing professional development, and student advocates to help students resolve non-instructional issues that may affect attendance and behavior. Students earn an 8th grade diploma and credits to be promoted to the 11th grade. They also learn self-advocacy, develop social and academic skills, and career goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evening High Schools serve active and inactive students who need to recover credits or who need flexible schedules for their course schedules. The goals are to increase graduation rates, re-engage inactive students, and help students stay on track to graduate. Started as a pilot program in January 1999, in 2011 they served 4,000 students at 27 locations. Enrollment is open to active students from any CPS alternative, charter or contract school who bring a referral from a school counselor and a transcript. Inactive students may only enroll at schools with programs designated for inactive students.

Exhibit 20: Multiple Pathways Education Options in New York and Philadelphia

Prevention/Intervention Programs	Recuperation/Recovery Programs
New York City Educational Program Options	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC) provide afternoon and evening classes for students who have been enrolled in high school for at least four years and are close to graduating. Students follow a nontraditional block schedule to focus on the credit portfolio they need to graduate. Students receive their diploma from their home high school. New York City Department of Education and community based organizations (CBOs) operate each YABC that provides youth development support, counseling, and job placement assistance. Centers can include a Learning to Work component. • The Learning to Work (LTW) is an intensive career exploration and college readiness program that uses CBOs to provide skills workshops, field trips, seminars and lectures to develop students' job skills. The CBOs also provide internships, counseling for college and careers, and job placement assistance. LTW services are offered as an enhancement with each of the NYC prevention and recovery options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer schools are small schools that serve students enrolled in high school for at least one year but are far from graduating. They provide a personalized learning environment, rigorous academics, instructional support, college awareness activities, and advisory support for academic and developmental goals. Transfer schools are operated by intermediaries that partner with CBOs. Transfer schools can also include an LTW feature. • GED Preparation Programs serve students who turn 17 on the last day of the previous school year with low reading (9.0) and math (7.5) levels. The programs prepare students for the GED and support help them develop meaningful post-secondary connections. They can include LTW component. • The GED Plus Initiative is a program that is blended with the LTW initiative. The purpose of this program and Access (a fulltime GED program) is to prepare students for the GED and support the development of meaningful post-secondary connections.
Philadelphia Educational Program Options	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career Academies and Talent Development High Schools (see page 43 for program descriptions) • Accelerated High Schools. These schools provide individualized, year-round instruction for overage and under-credited students in smaller learning environments. They serve students ages 15 to 21 with 13.5 or fewer credits who want to earn credits towards graduation in less than three years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twilight Schools. This program offers afternoon credit-recovery classes at nine high schools for students 17 or older. Students must have at least eight high school credits before they enroll and can earn six or more credits annually. • Gateway to College Program. This dual enrollment program located on the community college campus allows students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and college credits. Modeled after a Gates Foundation program, it serves students ages 16-21 who read at an 8th grade level or higher and are able to complete graduation requirements before they turn 22. • Re-engagement Centers. These one-stop centers provide services to youth wishing to re-enroll in high school diploma or GED programs. The centers connect youth to child care, employment, and other resources to support a successful transition back to education. • Education, Employment and Empowerment (E3) Centers. These centers provide case management and year-round programs for out-of-school youth and formerly adjudicated youth. They are managed by the Philadelphia Youth Network with operations are contracted out to CBOs. E3s are funded by federal and local human services.

C. Lessons Learned

The Youth Transition Funders Group's (YTFG) Connected by 25 Project has identified six lessons learned for implementing multiple pathways to graduation¹¹:

- **Lesson #1: Frame the Problem with a Multiple Pathways Team.** Closing the graduation gap through the multiple pathways framework requires a team approach inclusive of school systems, municipal/county administrators, and community based organizations. Communities have followed different approaches. Some have been district driven with a cross departmental team managing the process; others have used community and cross-system leaders to bring broader expertise to the table. Districts must consider the tradeoffs in terms of costs, efficiency, sustainability and expertise. Further, superintendent leadership throughout the process is critical to ensuring community engagement, effective implementation, equity and sustainability.
- **Lesson #2: Confront Misperceptions About the Causes and Solutions of the Graduation Gap.** Research shows that: 1) students can fall off-track at any point in their academic career; 2) most off-track students are persistent in their efforts to complete a secondary education and that school related indicators, not socio-economic indicators, are a much better predictor of who will drop out; and 3) many students need more than four years to finish high school.
- **Lesson #3: Conduct a Segmentation Analysis to Identify the Local Drivers of Dropping Out.** Convening a research advisory team is a critical feature of this step. Key issues to consider include: project scope; identification of indicators the school can control; collection of data on indicators with the greatest potential to predict who will and will not graduate; and identification of which schools are most effective at keeping the lowest performing groups of students on track. Examples of sample questions to guide the process ask “What do we know about the students that enter 9th grade and what happens to them?” and “Is falling off-track a strong predictor of not graduating? If so, what is known about these students?”
- **Lesson #4: Increase the Supply of Educational Options for Off-Track Students.** Based on work in the districts, YTFG suggests that the supply of education options needs to be expanded immediately since the need greatly outstrips the demand. Toward this end, communities must expand the variety of alternative school options available in their school systems and the quality of such options.
- **Lesson #5: Rely on Partnerships with Key Stakeholders to Implement the Plan.** YTFG notes that partnerships are a central feature of advancing the multiple pathways approach. Specifically, partnerships foster community support, a forum for working out problems, opportunities for cross-system learning, a way to bring community and youth advocates into the decision making process, and a way to leverage community support and local funding.
- **Lesson #6: Support Local and State Policy Changes that will Support the Plan.** The YTFG notes several changes to address policy barriers at the local and state level to improve graduation rates. These include raising the age of required attendance to 17 or 18; adding six year graduation rates to their outcome reporting; and incorporating on-track indicators (such as credits earned by grade level) into state and local accountability systems.

¹¹ Based on the YTFG 2008 Superintendent's Guide and progress reports on the Connected by 25 sites.

Chapter VII: Findings

Most youth (ages 14-24) need support well into their twenties before they achieve self-sufficiency. Successful youth transitions into adulthood are supported by schools, families, and higher education.¹ Youth who drop out of school rarely have enough support to effectively transition into adulthood.

No single government agency is responsible for helping young adults make a successful transition to adulthood. Moreover, many services designed to help children, including free education, terminate when youth reach adulthood.² Finally, while some programs (such as job training) are available to those who seek them, funding and program slots are limited.

This OLO report responds to the Council's interest in understanding how County-funded alternative education programs offered by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Montgomery College, and the County Government's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) support at-risk youths' successful transitions to adulthood. This chapter presents OLO's findings on five topics:

- Local Dropout and Graduation Rates;
- Alternative Education Programs – General Characteristics;
- Local Alternative Education Programs;
- Best Practices for Alternative Education Programs; and
- Lessons Learned from Other Communities.

In sum, OLO finds that Montgomery County may need a more coordinated approach to prevent and recover high school dropouts, particularly among student subgroups most at-risk. MCPS, Montgomery College, and DHHS offer multiple programs aimed at preventing and recovering high school dropouts. Several of these programs promote workforce development as part of their services, which aligns with the best practices identified in the research. Yet, in the absence of strategic plans and formative evaluations of existing programs, it remains unclear whether the County's alternative education programs are effective or meet the demand for such services.

LOCAL DROPOUT AND GRADUATION RATES

Finding 1. From FY06 to FY10, an average of 1,200 MCPS high school students dropped out annually. Dropout rates varied by student subgroup, school, and program.

Between FY06 and FY10, MCPS' overall annual dropout rates ranged from a low of 2% to a high of 2.9%, averaging 1,200 students annually over this five-year period. Among student subgroups, dropout rates varied, with higher than average dropout rates for Latino (4.9%) and Black (3.4%) students as well as ESOL (4.9%), FARMS (3.5%) and Special Education (2.9%) students.

Dropout rates also varied by school and program. Among MCPS comprehensive high schools, average annual dropout rates varied by a factor of 10, from 0.4% at Winston Churchill High School to 4.6% at Wheaton High School. Dropout data by MCPS program showed significantly higher rates among programs serving at-risk students, e.g., Regional Institute for Adolescents and Children (RICA) (5%), alternative programs (18%), and the Gateway to College program (31%).

¹ Wald and Martinez, 2003.

² Students who have not earned a high school diploma/equivalent by age 21 in Maryland are eligible for a public education until age 21 under COMAR (13A.02.060.2).

Finding 2 MCPS’ overall graduation rates range from 86-90% depending on how the measures are calculated. Significant disparities exist among student groups.

There are different ways to measure and report graduation rates. In 2010, using the “leaver rate,” MCPS reported an overall graduation rate of 90%.³ Beginning in 2011, MCPS must use a different measure, the “cohort rate,” to estimate the percentage of students who graduate “on time.”⁴ As the table below shows, use of the more precise cohort rate yields lower graduation rates for all students and increases graduation rate disparities among student subgroups.

	Class of 2010		
	Leaver Rate (L)	Cohort Rate (C)	Difference (C-L)
All Students	90.0	86.0	-4.0
Race and Ethnicity Subgroups			
Asian	96.4	94.7	-1.7
Black	85.8	78.0	-7.8
Latino	79.3	74.0	-5.3
White	95.3	93.7	-1.6
Service Subgroups			
Special Education	81.0	59.5	-21.5
ESOL	70.7	52.3	-18.4
FARMS	84.0	73.4	-10.6
Gender Subgroups			
Male	87.9	83.6	-4.3
Female	92.3	89.0	-3.3

Source: 2010 Maryland Report Card

More specifically, use of the cohort methodology to calculate graduation rates lowers MCPS’ reported rates across every subgroup, reducing the 2010 rate for all students by four percentage points (from 90% to 86%), and the rate for students who receive special education services by 21.5 points (from 81% to 59.5%). Some of this decline occurs because, under the new cohort measure, MCPS must count students with disabilities who take more than four years to graduate high school as “dropouts.”

The cohort rate methodology also produces greater reductions for black and Latino subgroups (7.8 and 5.3 percentage points respectively) compared to the Asian and white subgroups. This, in turn, widens the disparity among the graduation rates for these groups.

³ The formula for the leaver rate divides the number of students who graduate in a given year by the number of those students who started ninth grade four years earlier plus an estimate of the number of students who dropped out over the last four years. It excludes students who transfer in or out and does not account for students who take more than four years to graduate.

⁴ To calculate the cohort rate, schools must track each cohort of ninth graders and account for all students who enter or exit that class over the next four years. Newly issued state regulations mandate MCPS’ use of this approach.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS – GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Finding 3. Alternative education programs are intended to provide “alternative pathways” to success for at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth.

The term ‘alternative education’ typically refers to programs serving at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth who are no longer in traditional schools. Alternative education programs can include dropout prevention and recovery programs, and schools with specialized curriculums such as technical education programs.⁵

Common elements of alternative education approaches include:

- Small class sizes;
- Individualized learning experiences;
- Positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management;
- Flexible scheduling, including part-time and evening program offerings;
- Mentoring and case management; and
- Collaboration with other human service agencies.

Finding 4. No comprehensive alternative education policy framework exists at the national or state level. In some communities, alternative education is part of a broader strategy to reconnect youth to education and employment.

No federal agency’s mission focuses on all youth in alternative education or the comprehensive set of supportive services needed. The Department of Labor (DOL) historically offered few comprehensive youth employment and training programs for at-risk youth. Since the 1970’s, DOL has relied heavily on state and local governments to carry out its programs. At the state level, alternative education policies vary widely in scope and intensity across the country.

Some local jurisdictions are using alternative education as part of a comprehensive framework to reduce dropout rates, improve graduation rates, and structure services for at-risk youth. Known by various names (e.g., multiple pathways to graduation, the alternative pathway project, and Connected by 25), these frameworks aim to coordinate programs that address:

- Reductions in federal and state funding for public youth employment programs;
- A growing gap in the availability of skilled workers to fill technical jobs; and
- The lack of improvement in high school graduation rates despite education reforms focused on academic achievement and college readiness.

The principles that underlie a community’s policies and programs designed to reconnect at-risk youth to education and employment include:

- The use of data driven assessments and early warning systems;
- Multiple program options that combine high school completion, post-secondary education, training, and employment;
- Publicly funded transitional services that enable seamless service delivery across systems; and
- Reinforcing youth’s connections to families, children, and community based organizations.

⁵ This definition is from the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Dropout Prevention Center. As used in this report, MCPS’ Alternative Programs are a subset of County-funded alternative education programs.

LOCAL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Finding 5. In Montgomery County, primary responsibility for delivering alternative education programs resides in MCPS.

Fourteen alternative education programs in Montgomery County serve more than 14,000 youth. MCPS administers eight of these programs, including the three largest - Summer School, High School Plus, and Alternative I programs - that collectively serve about 12,000 students as described below.⁶ Exhibit 21 on the next page describes enrollment for all County-funded programs.

MCPS Alternative Education Programs	Enrollment	FY11 Budget
Alternative I Programs	1,664	\$3,257,000
Alternative II and III Programs	450	\$5,042,000
RICA*	152	\$3,326,000
High School Plus **	4,390	\$502,000
Summer School**	5,911	\$1,829,000
Online Pathway to Graduation**	129	\$75,000
Vocational Education in Special Education	583	\$11,427,000
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	30	\$267,000
Total	13,309	\$25,725,000

*MCPS share of funding; **FY12 data

Finding 6. MCPS refers students to alternative education programs for reasons including academic, disciplinary, social/emotional, and/or attendance challenges.

MCPS’ provides an array of alternative program whose referral practices vary by type of program.

- **Alternative I program** referrals are made by school-level teams for students experiencing academic, attendance, and/or behavioral challenges.
- **Alternative II and III program** referrals to separate campuses are made by school-level teams for students who have not been successful in the Alternative I program and/or have been recommended for expulsion due to disciplinary infractions.
- **RICA referrals** are made by MCPS central office staff primarily for students with emotional disabilities who have not been successful in other special education placements.
- **Credit Recovery Program** referrals (e.g., High School Plus) are generally made by counselors at a comprehensive school if a student has failed one or more core courses.
- **Gateway to College Program** referrals are made by counselors for students who must apply to this dual credit program where they can earn high school and college credits.

Of note, MCPS does not refer students to career and technology education (CTE) programs, which include programs at the Thomas Edison High School for Technology.

⁶ Of note, not all MCPS’ Summer School students are enrolled in credit-recovery courses; many are not at-risk. Data on the number of Summer School students earning recovery credits are not available from MCPS.

Exhibit 21: Alternative Education Programs in Montgomery County, FY11

Program	Key Program Features	Enrollment
MCPS Alternative and Special Education Programs		
Alternative I	Advisory classes, supports, and consultations in comprehensive middle and high schools.	1,664
Alternative II and III	Second-chance schools for students (a) needing more supports than Alternative I or (b) instead of being expelled.	450
Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents	Day and residential school for students with emotional disabilities or placed by courts. MCPS and DHMH operate this school.	152
MCPS Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs (FY12)		
High School Plus	Free credit recovery courses offered at comprehensive high schools (replaced Evening High School).	4,390
Summer School	Fee based new and recovery credit core/non core courses.	5,911
Online Pathway to Graduation	Online recovery credit and High School Assessments for current & former students who are three credits or less short of graduation.	129
MCPS Career and Technology Education Programs for Special Populations		
Vocational Education	Classroom and community based pre-vocational and vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities.	583
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	Career and technical education program focused on building entry-level job skills for Spanish speaking English language learners ages 18-21 who have experienced interrupted educations.	30
Montgomery College Programs		
Gateway to College	Two year dual enrollment program in MCPS and Montgomery College for students ages 16-20 who have dropped out.	141
GED Programs	GED placement testing, preparation classes, testing, and transition support for anyone age 16 or older who needs to complete a GED.	127
Montgomery Department of Health and Human Services Programs		
Conservation Corps	Job training, stipend, and weekly GED and computer literacy instruction to out-of-school and unemployed youth ages 17 to 25.	19
Youth Opportunity Centers	Services include case management, GED preparation, and workforce services. Identity, Inc. operates this program.	409
St. Luke's Transition Center	Assistance to 11 th and 12 th grade students with emotional disabilities to support the transition into adulthood.	89
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center/LAYC	GED preparation and job readiness programs for at-risk Latino youth. The Latin American Youth Center operates this program.	165
TOTAL		14,259

Finding 7. MCPS offers a wide variety of career and technology education programs. Students behind in credits typically cannot access these programs.

Career and technical education (CTE) programs are routinely identified in the dropout prevention literature as effective practices to meet the needs of at-risk youth. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that Career Academies and Talent Development High Schools that emphasize CTE are effective in reducing dropout rates and enabling students to progress in high school, particularly at-risk students.

MCPS offers CTE courses in all 25 comprehensive high schools, the Thomas Edison High School of Technology, the Needwood Academy, and RICA. The eligibility requirements for CTE programs, however, generally limit their enrollment to students performing at or above grade level.

As a result, CTE programs generally exclude the enrollment of MCPS students who are at the highest risk of dropping out. There are, however, two exceptions to this practice – vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities and the Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement (SEPA) program for Spanish speaking high school students with interrupted educations. Both of these programs provide experiential/job-based learning opportunities for students performing below grade level to support their transition into adulthood.

Finding 8. Enrollment in County-funded dropout recovery programs does not match the demand for services suggested by MCPS’ dropout data.

In Montgomery County, most of the alternative education programs serving at-risk youth focus on dropout prevention rather than recovery. The enrollment and budget data for the six County-funded dropout recovery programs in Table 10 show these programs served fewer than 900 youth in FY11. This number is notably lower than the 1,200 MCPS students who drop out of high school each year.

Table 10: County-Funded Dropout Recovery Programs

Program	FY11 Number Served	FY11 Budget	FY12 Approved Budget
Gateway to College	141	\$925,000	\$948,000
GED Program at Montgomery College	127	\$49,000	\$59,000
Conservation Corps	19	\$400,000	\$200,000
Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center	308	\$502,000	\$502,000
Upcounty Youth Opportunity Center	101	\$450,000	\$450,000
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center	165	\$133,000	\$133,000
Total	861	\$2,460,000	\$2,292,000

BEST PRACTICES FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Finding 9. Best practices for alternative education programs engage students by promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships.

The research literature on student engagement (National Research Council, 2003) identifies three best practices for motivating students to succeed in high school:

- Enhance the **rigor** of the curriculum by coupling high standards and expectations for student success with high levels of support to enable all students to succeed;
- Enhance the **relevance** of school by ensuring that curriculum and instruction respond to and reflect students’ current interests and long-term goals; and
- Foster **relationships** to motivate students to succeed by connecting students to their schools and communities.

Together, these practices are known as the “rigor, relevance, and relationship framework” for promoting student engagement. The exhibit below describes the key features of this framework based on best practices for promoting student engagement. A review of the research literature indicates that best practices in alternative education, dropout prevention, and career and technical education align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework for engaging students.

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Examples of Practices
Enhance rigor of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality instruction • High expectations for students
	Extensive supports that enable students to meet high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective classroom management • Social skills instruction • Summer school and tutoring
Enhance relevance of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice for students • Active, hands on learning • Flexibility
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on career and college readiness • Career and technical education • Service learning/internships • AP/IB/early college experiences
Foster relationships	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized instruction • Small schools and class sizes • Mentors
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Collaboration with other agencies
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council, 2003		

Finding 10. MCPS’ alternative education and career and technology education programs mostly align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. MCPS’ other dropout prevention efforts, however, do not fully align with best practices.

MCPS administers its alternative education programs to comply with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) requirements. MCPS has not evaluated its programs to determine their effectiveness at improving graduation rates; it was beyond the scope of this project to discern whether MSDE requirements align with research-based best practices.

To consider whether MCPS’ alternative education programs align with best practices, OLO developed a rubric to compare the “rigor, relevance, and relationship” framework to the key features of each MCPS alternative education program. Applying this rubric, OLO found that:

- MCPS’ Alternative I, II, and III programs and Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents generally align with best practices for promoting student engagement. The only gap evident is whether MCPS’ Alternative II and III programs reflect students’ interests in short- and/or long-term goals beyond earning a high diploma and preparing for college.
- MCPS’ career and technology education programs also squarely align with best practices for enhancing student engagement. One exception to this pattern is the absence of extensive supports to assist MCPS students pursuing career pathways to reach high expectations for student performance. Conversely, MCPS’ vocational programs in special education and Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement Program each employ extensive supports aimed at ensuring students reach high standards and expectations for performance.
- MCPS’ dropout prevention and recovery programs (e.g., High School Plus, Online Pathway to Graduation) focus exclusively on the rigor construct by providing students additional opportunities to master course content and earn their high school diploma. They do not address the relevance and relationship constructs to motivate students to succeed.

Finding 11. Three of six County-funded alternative education programs administered by Montgomery College and DHHS align with best practices.

The County funds six programs that provide dropout prevention or recovery services beyond MCPS:

- Gateway to College and GED Programs administered by Montgomery College; and
- Youth Opportunities Centers (Crossroads and Upcounty), Conservation Corps, Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, and St. Luke’s Career Transition Programs funded by DHHS.

All but the St. Luke’s program focus on re-engaging MCPS dropouts to earn their GED or to prepare for the workforce as part of their service delivery. To consider whether these County-funded alternative education programs align with best practices, OLO developed a rubric to compare the “rigor, relevance, and relationship” framework to the key features of each these programs. Applying this rubric, OLO found that the Gateway to College, Conservation Corps, and Youth Opportunity Centers most closely align with the best practices for supporting student engagement while the alignment for the other, smaller programs is not as strong. Like MCPS’ alternative education programs, none of these County-funded programs have been evaluated to determine their effectiveness at improving graduation rates.

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS FROM “MULTIPLE PATHWAY” COMMUNITIES

Finding 12. In some communities across the nation, alternative education programs are part of a comprehensive service delivery framework known as “multiple pathways to graduation.”

Some local jurisdictions have incorporated alternative education into a comprehensive service delivery framework aimed at reducing dropout rates, improving graduation rates, and structuring services for at-risk youth. Often called “multiple pathways to graduation,” this approach consists of a continuum of programs aimed at re-connecting at-risk youth, including dropouts, to education and employment. Typically, multiple pathways programs include both **education** and **occupation components**.

Similar to alternative education, **the education component** of this approach expands the program offerings of traditional comprehensive high schools to reach at-risk youth through the use of adequate “on ramps”, customized services, and a mix of schools:

- **Adequate on-ramps** are re-entry points for young people who detour from a traditional path. Examples of these “on ramps” include the increased availability of alternative schools, expanded youth employment services, or transitional services in GED programs.
- **Customized services** require educational and employment systems, including higher education, to recognize the types of challenges that some young people face and customize the types of supports and opportunities they provide to enable these young people to succeed.
- **A Mix of Schools and Programs** recognizes the need to provide engaging educational opportunities for youth across the academic continuum (e.g., pre-GED, GED, and diploma).

The **occupational component** of the multiple pathway approach aims to ensure gainful employment or access to career training for at-risk youth. Some examples of this component include:

- The **Learning to Work Program (LTW)** developed by the New York City Department of Education. The LTW program is an intensive career exploration and college readiness program that uses community based organizations to provide skills workshops, field trips, job skills seminars, internships, college and career counseling, and job placement assistance.
- **Career Academies**, as used in school districts across the country, including Philadelphia. Career Academies provide integrated academic and vocational coursework. Career academies also use partnerships with local employers to build links between school and work and provide students with work-based learning opportunities.
- **Linked Learning** model high schools (located primarily in California) that educate at-risk students in the same environment as other students. This model emphasizes work opportunities (e.g., internships), hands-on projects, the involvement of career professionals, and training for in-demand careers.

Finding 13. Successful multiple pathway programs rely on data-driven strategies, focus on increasing educational options, and develop collaborative partnerships.

Successful efforts to establish a multiple pathways framework share the following implementation characteristics:

- **Data driven.** These programs use segmentation analysis to identify students who are off-track or academically at-risk. Following a segmentation analysis, a district may enhance or redesign its data systems to more closely monitor student cohorts and capture longitudinal data for at-risk students. For example, a community may increase its pre-GED program opportunities in response to a high number of dropouts needing these services.
- **Focus on increasing educational capacity and options, particularly for out-of-school youth.** Local districts also use the results of a segmentation analysis to design a portfolio of program options. The array of programs typically consists of:
 - Prevention/intervention programs (such as bridge programs, high school orientation programs, or attendance monitoring) are designed to increase graduation rates by reducing the number of off-track students; and;
 - Recuperation/recovery programs that expand options for students who have fallen behind or dropped out. Examples of these include credit recovery programs and twilight schools.
- **Collaborative partnerships that cross institutions, sectors and organizations.** The collaborative work among community stakeholders and institutions, such as private industry councils and institutions of higher education, is a defining feature of multiple pathway initiatives.

Chapter VIII: Recommended Discussion Issues

The Council requested this study to understand how County-funded alternative education programs support youths' successful transitions to adulthood, particularly among at-risk youth. OLO found that the County offers a number of alternative education programs through MCPS, Montgomery College, and the Department of Health and Human Services aimed at preventing and recovering dropouts. For the most part, these programs align with best practices research that stresses the importance of rigorous and relevant curricula and fostering relationships to keep students feeling connected.

OLO's review found that some program gaps exist, particularly related to access to career and occupational training and program supports for all students. An example of one gap is whether Alternative II and III program curricula adequately address students' short- and long-term career goals, beyond college readiness. Another issue is the uneven access to career and technology education (CTE) programs for all students.

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County or that measure to what extent the County's programs meet that demand. However, the data that are available suggest efforts to enhance access to occupational training and expand outreach efforts to improve dropout recovery are warranted. For example, the County's total enrollment of about 860 youth in its dropout recovery programs in FY11 captured only 70% of the average number of students who drop out of MCPS in one year.

Based on the experience of other jurisdictions, one option for the County to consider is working in conjunction with its workforce development efforts and the business community to reconfigure alternative education programs. Specifically, one model to consider is the "multiple pathways to graduation approach," which aims to re-connect students (both dropouts and those at risk of dropping out) to education and employment opportunities.

To facilitate a discussion on the best use of County resources to support successful youth transitions into adulthood, OLO recommends the Council convene an Education Committee worksession with representatives of Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Economic Development to discuss the following issues outlined below. The issues are intended to improve the Council's understanding and oversight of County appropriations aimed at enabling youth to be successful both in school and at work.

Discussion Issue #1: What is known about the demand for alternative education programs in the County and the extent to which County programs meet that demand?

Alternative education programs provide second chance opportunities for youth who have dropped out or who are at-risk for dropping out to achieve success in education and transition into adulthood. Understanding the demand for alternative education requires understanding the individual, school, and community risk factors for dropping out of school, the scope of the dropout problem, and the typical life paths taken by recent dropouts. Quantifying the demand for alternative education programs locally is the first step toward discerning how well current County programs meet that demand.

Alternative education programs can also be tailored to meet the needs of on-track students performing at grade level and not in need of recovery credits who desire a different educational experience. For example, career and technical education high schools and Career Academies can meet the needs of on-track youth desiring occupational training.

To improve understanding of the demand for alternative education in Montgomery County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- How many youth in Montgomery County (ages 16-24) are not on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and what percent of all County youth does this represent? How many of these youth are served by Montgomery College or Department of Health and Human Services' programs that offer dropout prevention or recovery services?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve its graduation rate? For example, what measures does MCPS use to identify secondary students as off-track to graduate high school in four years? What percent of MCPS students fit this description and how many are served in MCPS programs targeting such students?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve student engagement among on-track students? For example, how is demand for MCPS' career and technology education programs measured and how many students are enrolled in career development programs?

Discussion Issue #2: What role should occupational training play in current County efforts to engage youth?

Successful transitions to adulthood require that young people develop both academic and occupational skills. The "multiple pathways to graduation" approach relies on both an educational and occupational component to re-engage disconnected youth. The research literature on student engagement confirms the essential role that career and technical education can play in motivating youth, including at-risk youth, to stay in school and graduate.

Currently, the County offers a host of alternative education programs that emphasize the educational component of the multiple pathways approach. MCPS administers most of the County's alternative education programs. MCPS' programs focus on getting at-risk students to perform at grade level by earning enough credits to graduate and by passing Maryland's high school assessments.

Most of the County's alternative education programs administered by Montgomery College and the Department of Health and Human Services also emphasize the educational component of the multiple pathways approach with a focus on completing a high school diploma or equivalent. The exception to this pattern is DHHS' Conservation Corps that, in addition to its education component, includes internships and stipends aimed at re-connecting at-risk youth to the workforce. Of note, the Conservation Corps is not currently operating and is seeking a vendor to re-start this program.

Finally, the County's Department of Economic Development (DED) administers the County's youth employment programs that focus on workforce development. Note: A review of the key features and characteristics of DED's youth programs was beyond the scope of this project.

To consider what role occupational training and workforce development should play in the process of engaging youth in the County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- What should be the occupational component of each agency's alternative education programs? What are the challenges associated with providing more occupational services?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the career and technical education (CTE) component of existing alternative education programs? What partnerships can be fostered to link existing dropout prevention and recovery programs to related occupational training and workforce development initiatives?
- Beyond the agencies represented at the worksession, are there other organizations that should be engaged in providing more occupational training and CTE opportunities for County youth?

Discussion Issue #3: What role can the private sector play to bolster the County's youth workforce development programs?

Two current challenges - tight budgets facing local governments and a need to increase the occupational component of existing alternative education programs - suggest that the role of the private sector in supporting youth workforce development opportunities could be strengthened.

Federal policy requires the inclusion of representatives from the private sector to advise local career and technical education and workforce development efforts. Locally, the Montgomery County Collaboration Board, which includes private sector representatives, advises MCPS and the College on its career and technology education offerings. Private sector representatives also comprise the majority of the Workforce Investment Board that advises DED on its programming. Additionally, local business partners support and fund three trade foundations that support MCPS' automotive technology, construction, and information technology programs.

To consider what roles the private sector can take in supporting additional youth workforce development opportunities, OLO recommends the Council ask representatives of County agencies and business organizations to address the following questions:

- Beyond the County's Collaboration and Workforce Investment Boards, are there any public/private partnerships that provide workforce development for at-risk youth? Are there lessons from these efforts that could inform future efforts?
- What opportunities exist to enhance private sector involvement in County agency CTE and youth workforce development efforts?
- From the perspective of the County agencies, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering with the private sector to advance youth workforce development opportunities?
- From the perspective of local businesses/private sector, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering with County agencies to advance youth workforce development opportunities?

Discussion Issue #4: What should be the role of Thomas Edison High School of Technology in expanding occupational training opportunities for youth?

Thomas Edison High School of Technology serves as MCPS' career and technology education school for students interested in pursuing one of 16 career pathways, seven of which are only available at Edison (e.g., HVAC). Students enrolled at Edison spend half of the day at their home school taking core academic subjects and the remainder of their school day at Edison in a three-period CTE course tied to their specific career program of study. Examples of career programs of student include business management and finance, information technology, and early childhood development.

Generally, students at-risk are not enrolled at Edison because admission is limited to students performing at or above grade level in terms of academic credits earned. Edison has also operated under capacity over the past five years; with the capacity to serve 1,000 students, FY11 enrollment was only 555 students.

In FY10, MCPS convened the Edison Career Pathway Program/Facilities Project to offer recommendations for improving enrollment. Their recommendations include expanding opportunities for certificate-bound students with disabilities, updating current pathway programs, creating more career and industry connections to support under-enrolled programs, and downsizing some programs to expand the capacity of over-enrolled programs.¹ According to the Board of Education's and the County Executive's Recommended Capital Improvement Program FY13-FY18, Edison's modernization is scheduled for completion by August 2018.

To consider the role that Edison could play in providing additional career and technical education opportunities for County youth, OLO recommends the Council ask MCPS representatives to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to more youth in the County? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to expanding Edison's programs?
- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to interested students who are performing below grade level (e.g., behind in academic credits)? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to this approach?
- Among Edison's current pathways, which programs hold the most promise for re-engaging at-risk and out-of-school youth? What academic or non-academic supports might these youth need to be successful?
- Has MCPS leadership considered converting Edison into a comprehensive high school to serve high school students earlier in their careers (i.e., 9th and 10th grade)? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks to this approach?

¹ See MCPS Report of the Thomas Edison High School of Technology/Wheaton High School Roundtable Advisory Committee was transmitted to members of the Board of Education on January 31, 2011

Chapter IX: Agency Comments

The Office of Legislative Oversight greatly appreciates the time taken by agency staff to review our draft report and to provide feedback. This final OLO report incorporates technical corrections and comments provided by Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, and Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services staff.

The written comments received from the Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools on the final draft of this Office of Legislative Oversight report are attached (pages 79-83).



March 8, 2012



Dr. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst
Montgomery County Office of Legislative Oversight
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Dr. Bonner-Tompkins:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff members with the opportunity to review and comment on the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report, Alternative Education in Montgomery County. MCPS staff members who participated in the review and the development of this report appreciated the collaborative, constructive nature of the interagency process. Comments and suggestions for technical changes were previously provided, but not all suggestions and changes were evident in the final report. Additionally, we have comments that address your specific findings.

An analysis of the report indicates that feedback from MCPS staff members was carefully considered and incorporated into the draft. The following comments on the completed draft are provided below:

- In chapter I, page 1, under “Background,” the report includes a definition for Alternative Education from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University. Although MCPS generally accepts much of the definition and description used in the report, we believe that it is too broad and encompasses a disparate range of programs including the Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA). RICA provides a program for students with identified special education needs and the program is designed to be comprehensive in addressing the identified needs while providing a general education program.
- In chapter IV, page 21, the report reads, “principals are encouraged to design their Alternative I programs to meet the specific needs evident in their schools.” We believe a more complete description would be, “principals are encouraged to design their Alternative I program to provide direct academic, social/emotional, and behavioral management services using the critical components of alternative education programs to meet the specific needs evident in their schools.”
- In chapter IV, page 22, the report states, “that Alternative I programs typically target services to students at-risk who are not eligible for special education services.” Alternative I programs “typically target services to students who experience academic

Office of the Superintendent of Schools

failure and are at risk of not completing school.” Students who receive special education services would not automatically be excluded from the pool of students eligible for alternative services as defined by MCPS. The current construction of the sentence implies that a student receiving special education services would be excluded from alternative services or that a school team would need to rule out special education before referring a student for alternative services.

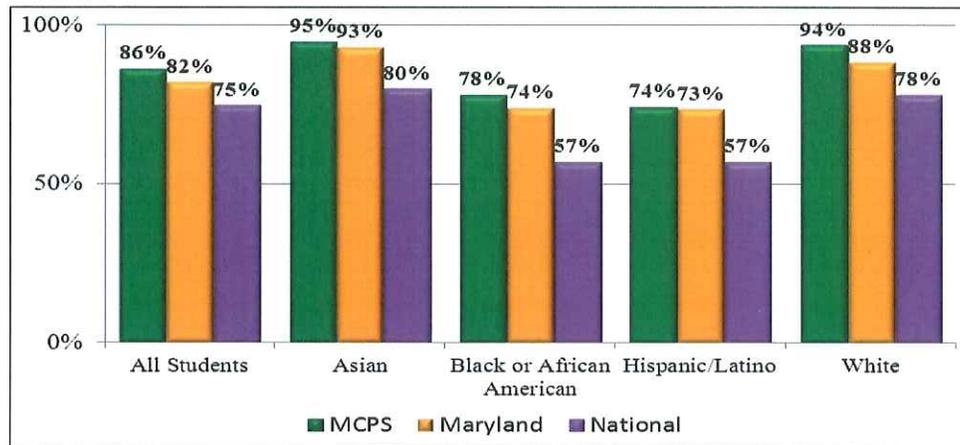
- In chapter IV, page 22, Footnote #9, the report makes reference to the Department of Alternative Programs. There is no Department of Alternative Programs; rather Alternative Programs resides in the Office of School Performance.
- In chapter IV, page 32, the report states that generally, students must be performing at or above grade level to enroll at the Thomas Edison High School of Technology (Edison). As a clarification, out of the 16 programs, there are no Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements for Edison programs other than the Medical Careers Program. The GPA requirement for the Medical Careers Program is due to the technical and background knowledge necessary to pursue that course of study.
- In chapter IV, page 49, Chart 8 RICA, the report makes reference to college preparedness as a feature of the RICA program. We believe that in addition to college preparedness, a feature of the program should include: full transition services, inclusion into general education programs, Thomas Edison High School of Technology, and Montgomery College (when possible).
- In the chart under finding 5, page 67, the report makes reference to “Vocational Education in Special Education.” MCPS is concerned about the term “Vocational Education” used in reference to special education services for students who are served in certificate-bound programs. We would like to suggest that the report reflects the actual names of the programs (e.g. Learning for Independence, School-Community Based, Rock Terrace School).

MCPS offers the following comments on project findings included in the report:

Finding 3. Alternative education programs are intended to provide “alternative pathways” to success for at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth.

Engaging and supporting our at-risk, vulnerable or disconnected youth is a mutual concern, and although MCPS’ graduation rate is among the highest in the nation, and the graduation rates for our Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino youth far exceed national norms, there is clearly room for improvement. The importance of multiple strategies, approaches and programs to reach these students is not in dispute.

Graduation Rate



Source: 2011 MCPS and Maryland 4-year cohort graduation rate, www.mdreportcard.org
2009 Nation On-Time Graduation Rate, National Center for Education Statistics

However, using the term “alternative education programs” as a catch-all phrase, despite its local meaning, obscures the critical issues facing our community in our efforts to ensure that every student is engaged and successful. This overly broad definition also operates to blur the unique needs of our student population. For example, students who require the therapy integrated and/or residential components at RICA have significantly different needs than students in our comprehensive high schools who may require more hands-on instructional opportunities in order to remain engaged in their education.

Finding 4. No comprehensive alternative education policy framework exists at the national or state level. In some communities, alternative education is part of a broader strategy to reconnect youth to education and employment.

There is no comprehensive “alternative education policy framework” in part because it is difficult to define the at-risk population in a manner that would be meaningful for program design. There is much variance that is rooted in the causes of the lack of student engagement. Building a comprehensive framework for addressing the needs of at-risk students is a laudable goal; however, a more compelling goal is effectively addressing those needs. With or without a framework, in order to serve at-risk students with efficacy, it is incumbent upon a school district and a local community to have a wide array of strategies and programs to address individual student’s strengths and needs. The strategies and programs identified in the report focus on only a small segment of MCPS’ efforts to support at-risk or disengaged students.

With the understanding that dropout prevention starts with high quality classroom instruction, MCPS is in the process of sharpening and refining our focus on teaching and learning. Beyond the focus on quality first instruction, MCPS currently is engaged in developing a systemic approach to recognizing and meeting the needs of all students, especially students who require

more intensive or innovative interventions. This emphasis on identifying and implementing appropriate interventions based on individual student needs is intended to address many of the issues raised in the report and is something that I identified as a strategic focus for the system in December and that the Board of Education is discussing

Of course, we know that there will continue to be the need for specialized programs for small numbers of students with unique needs, such as the Phoenix Program, with its emphasis on substance abuse recovery. To strengthen the school system's efforts to meet the needs of these students, the position of coordinator of alternative programs has been upgraded to principal. It is our belief that this provides for a strong instructional leader, who can weave rigor, relevance, and relationships throughout the educational experience of the students.

Finding 5. In Montgomery County, primary responsibility for delivering alternative education programs resides in MCPS.

Although MCPS has the responsibility for administering three levels of alternative programs and administers other services to reach our at-risk youth, it is clear that the school system, in isolation, cannot meet the myriad of needs of at-risk children. There are various county governmental agencies that play critical roles in strengthening the social fabric that supports students to stay in school and earn their high school diploma. The report notes that cross-agency collaboration can coordinate local efforts in such a way as to prevent students from falling through cracks in the system. In addition, this collaboration leads to seamless intervention services for students and families. These efforts at cross-agency collaboration and community partnerships must be viewed as an integral component of an overall strategy to meet the needs of at-risk children.

Finding 7. MCPS offers a wide variety of career and technology education (CTE) programs. Students behind in credits typically cannot access these programs.

Of the 16 programs, with the exception of the Medical Careers Program, there are no GPA requirements that would limit the participation of at-risk students in CTE courses. Students are not excluded from CTE programs because they are struggling academically; however, the reality for many of our students who fall behind is that they must take specific courses for credit toward graduation. For some of our struggling students, this means that there is no room in their schedules for CTE courses. Once students are in the position of trying to make up credit, it can be difficult to find room in their schedule for a course that does not fulfill a graduation requirement.

The report notes with approval both vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities and the Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement (SEPA); however, the key fact that sets both these programs apart is that the students in the programs are not anticipating earning a high school diploma. Both these programs are predicated on the assumption that the student will not earn a diploma and therefore, school schedules can be based on interests rather than requirements. The plethora of state graduation requirements and narrowly defined pathways

toward graduation leaves local education agencies with little flexibility for creative or innovative schedule building for our most challenged students.

Finding 10. MCPS' alternative education and career and technology education programs mostly align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. MCPS' other dropout prevention efforts, however, do not fully align with best practices.

The report uses the rigor, relevance, and relationships rubric to evaluate MCPS' programs. These are the key elements of any successful approach to supporting at-risk students toward graduation. However, in the report, this rubric is used as the prism to view each program as if it operates in isolation, unconnected to the web of supports that often surround students. For example, the report argues that High School Plus and Online Pathway to Graduation do not address either student interest (relevance) or relationships; however, these programs do not operate in isolation. They are often one component in an overall strategy to help students graduate.

In terms of relationship for example, High School Plus takes place in a student's home high school, often with teachers the student knows. It is expected that students who take courses through the High School Plus Program remain active in the life of the school community, including accessing supports, participating in extracurricular activities, and all other aspects of school life. Although the three "R's" are not each a part of every program or strategy, they are what guides MCPS in programming for each individual student. The implicit assumption of the report is that every program or strategy should check off all three boxes of the rubric. This assumption is problematic because it ignores the reality that every component of a path to graduation cannot meet all three "R's." A student may have no interest in the State and Local Government course, but the state of Maryland requires that the student pass just such a course.

We share the sense of urgency about meeting the needs of our most at-risk students as articulated in the report and look forward to a constructive dialogue about how to coordinate efforts so as to most effectively reach our children in need. The collaborative nature of this process was appreciated and we look forward to discussing the Alternative Education Program in MCPS.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Starr", written in a cursive style.

Joshua P. Starr, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

JPS:kjm

Copy to:

Dr. Lacey	Ms. Richardson
Mr. Edwards	Mr. Talley
Dr. Garran	Ms. Webb
Mr. Lang	

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Title	Begins on
A	Glossary of Key Terms	A-1
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C	Attending to Learn: The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance, History and Charge, Executive Summary and Recommendations	C-1
D	Summary of MCPS Formative Assessments of Alternative I, II, and III Programs	D-1

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms for OLO Report 2012-4

Term	Definition
Advisory classes	Support classes where students can receive alternative education services. These classes typically take place as a course bearing class during the school-day, replacing an elective course.
Alternative education programs	Programs serving vulnerable youth who are typically no longer in traditional schools. Such youth can be in school or out of school. Alternative education programs include six sets of approaches: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer and evening schools that enable students to earn credits; • Separate alternative schools with a special curriculum (e.g., parenting or job skills); • Alternative classrooms within a traditional school; • Continuation schools for students no longer attending traditional schools; • Second chance schools for students at highest risk of being expelled or incarcerated; and • Residential schools for special case students, usually placed by the courts or the family.
At-risk students	Students who are at-risk of not completing high school within four years.
Career academies	Career-focused small learning communities within schools that provide integrated academic and vocational coursework and use partnerships with local employers to link students to work.
Career and technical/technology education (CTE)	Courses that aim to prepare students for careers and higher education by enhancing students' core academic skills, employability skills, and job-specific skills related to a specific career pathway/program of study.
Career pathway/career programs of study	A specific sequence of academic and technology courses in a particular career cluster that prepare a student for an entry-level position within a particular field.
Comprehensive school	MCPS schools that provide a comprehensive set of services for all students as compared to a special education or other specialized school that serves a subset of MCPS' student enrollment.
Consultative services	Alternative education services that are delivered on the consultative basis rather than in an advisory class. Services can be delivered via a pull-out model (staff pulls student out of regular class to offer services) or push-in model (staff delivers services to student within their regular class).
Credit-recovery classes	Classes that enable students to complete coursework failed in prior classes and earn credits toward graduation.
Disciplinary infractions	Student infractions that can result in suspensions or expulsions. Examples include distribution of controlled substances, possession or use of weapons, physical attacks, fire setting, gang-related incidents, possession or use of intoxicants, sexual offenses, and theft.
Disconnected students/youth	Refers to youth, ages 14-24, who are neither connected to school nor to employment.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms for OLO Report 2012-4, Continued

Term	Definition
Dropout prevention	Programs and services aimed at preventing students at-risk of not completing high school within four years from dropping out.
Dropout recovery	Programs and services aimed at reconnecting youth who have dropped out of high school to enroll in program that enables them to complete their high school diploma or an equivalent (GED).
High School Assessment (HSA) Bridge projects	Project modules in content areas that have been completed by students who have passed the High School Assessment (HSA)-related course but have not passed an HSA after two or more attempts. Completion of the projects offers an alternative opportunity for completing Maryland's HSA requirements for graduation.
High School Plus	Credit-recovery classes and repeater course sections during and at the end of the school day. High School Plus also offers some original credit courses and support for students needing to complete HSA Bridge Projects to graduate.
High Schools that Work	A high school reform model sponsored by the Southern Educational Regional Board that includes a focus on integrated academic and CTE curriculums.
Gateway to College program	A dual credit program at Montgomery College that enables MCPS dropouts to simultaneously earn high school credits toward graduation and college credits toward an associate's degree
MCPS alternative programs	MCPS' Alternative I programs in comprehensive schools, Alternative II programs for students in need or more intensive services, and Alternative III programs for students who could have been expelled.
Multiple pathways to graduation	A coordinated approach to connecting students at-risk, including dropouts, to education and employment opportunities.
Off-track students	Students who are not on-track to complete high school within four years because they have not earned enough high school credits.
Online Pathway to Graduation	Provides current and former students three credits shy of graduation the opportunity to earn recovery credits and meet the requirements of the High School Assessments online.
Repeaters course	Courses that students can re-take to earn academic credit because they failed these courses previously.
Summer School	Provides opportunities for students to earn original credits and recovery credits in courses they failed.
Talent Development High Schools	A high school reform model sponsored by Johns Hopkins University that features small learning communities and career academies.
Twilight Schools	Afternoon and evening programs providing youth no longer enrolled in traditional schools coursework opportunities toward graduation.

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Attending to Learn The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance

*Final Report of the Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18
Submitted to the Maryland General Assembly and Governor
December 1, 2007*



Executive Summary

The motivation for virtually all education initiatives—such as House Bill 36 and No Child Left Behind—is to enable children to succeed, maximize their human potential, and lead productive lives. Research tells us that young people in Maryland can achieve these objectives by staying in school, mastering a body of work through grade 12, and earning a Maryland High School Diploma.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

The high school diploma is a prerequisite for self-sufficiency in America, and yet in the 2005-06 school year alone, 1.2 million students nationally (“Diplomas Count,” 2007), and 11,058 in Maryland (Maryland State Department of Education, 2006), left high school before earning one.

These students face a harsh future. Without diplomas, young adults earn lower salaries and face reduced earning potential. It is estimated that American adults without diplomas earn 27 percent less than those with diplomas (Day & Newburger, 2002). High school dropouts are also disproportionately represented in prison. In 2004, dropouts made up 41 percent of the nation’s prison inmates (Harlow, 2003). Dropouts can even expect a shorter life span and more instances of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

Beyond individual consequences, the problem of high school dropouts affects everyone. Less education is associated with an increased dependency on public assistance (Heckman, 2000). Further, research indicates that low educational achievement directly correlates to crime committed by juveniles and adults (Bonczar, 2003). It costs Maryland from \$8,237 to \$11,740 per year to educate a student (Maryland State Department of Education, “The Fact Book,” 2006). Consider the costs of incarceration. In FY 2004, the average daily population in a secure detention facility under the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services Administration was 291 children. The average daily cost in FY 2004 for children was \$243. The State spends over \$70,000 per day for children incarcerated in a secure facility. This does not represent children in alternative placements or programs (Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, 2004).

“Most students don’t wake up on a single morning and decide to drop out of school. Rather, dropping out is the end of a long-term process of disengagement, as students find school to be disconnected from—even at odds with—the rest of their lives.”
—Geoff Garin, President, Peter D. Hart Research Associates

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

As Geoff Garin, President of Peter D. Hart Research Associates puts it: “Most students don’t wake up on a single morning and decide to drop out of school.” On the contrary, the cycle of habitual truancy begins as early as elementary school. Poverty, dysfunctional families, learning disabilities, emotional issues, environmental issues, substance abuse, lack of parental engagement, language barriers, and low expectations on the part of the student or society—all of these factors and more lead students to abandon their education.

When asked, students who drop out of school tell us that schools did not motivate them to work hard, were not sufficiently demanding, and did not provide necessary academic and personal supports. Other students stated that as they grew older, increased freedom and other distractions drew them away from school. Significant reasons given by students for dropping out included not being sufficiently challenged, and feeling unmotivated, bored, and unsupported. Other, more personal reasons, were also significant: needing a job, becoming a parent, taking care of a sick family member (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006).

EVERY CHILD NEEDS A CARING ADULT

When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school.

—A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement, National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education.

The family is likely the most important factor in determining a child’s educational success. Children need daily encouragement and validation. But not all parents are engaged or even interested in their children’s education. While parent and family involvement is not within the purview of this Task Force, it is inextricably linked to student success. Therefore, the Task Force must emphasize that successfully reducing the dropout rate hinges upon children having a parent or other responsible adult, which includes a qualified mentor, to support and encourage them. Knowing this, the school community should confirm that each child has at least one responsible adult in his life encouraging him to be successful in school. If that adult cannot be confirmed, then one must be found for him. That adult should stress to the student the importance of schoolwork, and should help the family understand that allowing the child too much access to distractions (television, video games, etc.) will thwart her learning.

Title I schools currently require a “School-Parent Compact,” which is an effective tool for describing how schools and parents will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement. Compacts, developed jointly between parents and school staff, describe

the responsibilities of both parties as they relate to academic, attendance, and behavioral standards, and serve as a basis for productive, two-way communication. It would be beneficial to expand this practice to every student who does not have an adult in his or her education life.

NO SINGLE REMEDY

Studying the impact of changing the age of compulsory attendance from age 16 to age 18 has been the focus of the Task Force. Some states have instituted a compulsory attendance age of 17 or 18, though most have included exceptions to allow principals and superintendents the latitude to continue to remove students who prove disruptive or habitually truant. This Task Force has explored the complexities of raising the compulsory attendance age and ensuring student success. Fundamental to our consideration is recognizing that students who drop out of school are diverse and thus there is no single remedy for the ills that lead them to drop out.

Education is the first step in breaking the cycle of poverty that is exacerbated by the lack of opportunity that dropping out of high school brings. Engaging students in a positive learning environment is critical whether or not students are legally allowed to leave at 16 or 18.

INTERVENTIONS ENGAGE STUDENTS AND KEEP THEM IN SCHOOL

There is a spectrum of interventions that would engage students who leave school prior to graduation. These interventions could include anything from more effectively engaging students within the traditional classroom and school, to offering alternative and creative solutions to educate students outside of the traditional classroom or school. Since there is no standard definition for “alternative programming” in Maryland, the framework on which these interventions can be created is limited only by resources. There are certain factors or characteristics, however, that any program designed to effect change in the at-risk student should include. These are: (1) effective organization and administration (program design that supports low student/adult ratios or alternative education with supports); (2) safe school climate (family atmosphere, cultural sensitivity); (3) student-centered service and instruction delivery (targeted interventions and monitoring); (4) appropriate content/curriculum (combination of academic and work-based learning); and (5) a staff culture of high expectations and commitment to knowing students as individuals. In addition to program needs, it is also important that students feel a sense of support and empowerment (from family, neighborhood, school); positive values/identity (character, sense of purpose); boundaries/expectations (role models, family, positive peer influence); commitment to learning (life-long learning); and social competency and constructive use of time (decision-making skills, conflict resolution, youth programs and activities).

*“No problem can be solved
by the same level of
consciousness that created
it”*

—Albert Einstein

There are currently programs aimed at providing students with skills and assistance to graduate high school or complete a GED program, attain post-secondary education, and develop entry-level job skills. These programs enable students to feel a sense of purpose and connection to their learning environments. Students feel connected in a variety of ways. Connectedness can take the form of an individual relationship with a staff member, participation in an extracurricular activity, a positive peer group, or recognition for academics. Model programs tend to enable students to meaningfully connect their education to the work world and emphasize the importance of relationships. These programs address the diversity of reasons that precipitate students leaving high school early. Because students leave high school early for a wide variety of reasons, we must consider a multi-faceted approach in exploring ways to foster and guarantee student success. All Marylanders benefit when Maryland youth realize their human potential and lead productive lives as members of our community.

THE FISCAL IMPACT OF INCREASED INTERVENTIONS

Although the overall socioeconomic impact of these programs is significant, substantial resources are needed to successfully implement them. Assessing the fiscal impact on the State

“More of the same ... will not work.... Intensifying efforts that have repeatedly failed is not a route to success. However, the necessary first step toward success is not very complicated: it lies in simply recognizing that, when it comes to schools, one size cannot possibly fit all. Thus, if a student has demonstrated she’s not going to make it in one kind of school, we should let her try another. And it can’t reasonably be another that is essentially the same as the one she left. Let her try a different kind of school.”

—Mary Anne Raywid, Professor Emeritus, Hofstra University

and local governments seems imperative as families, business leaders, politicians, and educators consider raising the compulsory age of attendance from 16 to 18 years of age.

Based on figures from the Maryland State Department of Education, the average number of students dropping out of Maryland’s public schools each year is approximately 10,500. For calculation purposes we projected that this number would remain unchanged so that a two-year total would be approximately 21,000 students. Facility analysis was based on an assumption that students would return to a typical classroom with 20–25 students. Based on the present Public School Construction Program facilities capacity formula (25 students per teaching station at 85 percent utilization), we assumed 21.25 students per classroom. The committee took into account each system’s present overall high school capacity without regard for the fact that some geographical areas of a local school system might be more heavily impacted by returning students than other neighborhoods. Statewide usage capacity is already at 100 percent with 11 systems above 100 percent. The number of high school students is projected to decline in the state

through 2014, but the total public school enrollment in Maryland in 2015 is trending upward.

To calculate the staffing needs, we used the statewide average of one instructor for every 19 students. Recognizing that “new construction” often takes years to come to fruition, the subcommittee decided to provide both the cost to provide newly constructed classroom space and the cost to provide portable classrooms to expand facility capacity in the short term. New construction costs and portable classroom costs are based on current Public School Construction Program budget estimates. New construction was calculated at \$247 per square foot. The purchase and installation of portable classrooms is estimated at \$80,000 per unit. The more likely approach of purchasing portable classrooms to accommodate the additional 21,000 students totals approximately \$46 million. Additional space is required in 15 of the 24 school systems.

The total additional costs for providing educational and related services to the additional students exceed \$200 million per year. (See the “State Summary of Additional Costs” table below.) This figure varies in the projected impact on local jurisdictions, from a low of \$385,000 in Talbot County to a high of \$60 million in Baltimore City. (For specific district information, see tables 1–6 in the report of Subcommittee Three: Practical Implications and Resources.)

The State Summary of Additional Costs table is based on data currently collected by the Maryland State Department of Education. The State Summary of Additional Costs table does not include certain other potential costs, including costs associated with: alternative education programs for students ages 17 or 18; alternative education programs associated with early interventions at much younger ages; professional development; or costs associated with enforcing daily attendance and monitoring truancy of students.

STATE SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL COSTS	
<i>Additional Pupils (17 and 18 year olds)</i>	<i>21,044</i>
<i>Additional Instructional Staff</i>	<i>1,108</i>
<i>Additional Classrooms Needed</i>	<i>571</i>
<i>Cost for Additional Pupils (rounded, annual)</i>	<i>\$200,015,000</i>
<i>Cost for Additional Portable Classrooms</i>	<i>\$45,660,000</i>

Numbers are rounded, one time.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONSIDERATIONS

An action plan to implement a change in the age of compulsory attendance must address both the critical shortage of highly qualified teachers in Maryland—17.8 percent of classes in core academic subjects are presently *not* taught by highly qualified teachers, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—and the need for professional development opportunities to train teachers to more effectively engage students at risk of dropping out of school (Maryland

Report Card, 2007). This is particularly important given the potential additional strain on the existing teacher shortage that may be precipitated by military base realignment. Additionally, the move toward all-day kindergarten will likely further deplete the availability of highly qualified teachers in Maryland. The challenge is underscored by the fact that Maryland institutions of higher education cannot meet Maryland's current demand for highly qualified teachers. While the above figures include the total number of teachers needed to fill the positions created by the additional students, assuming the current teacher-student ratio remains the same, it does not include costs associated with professional development needs.

Educators must use diverse and, in some cases, nontraditional pedagogical methods to engage potential dropouts. Moreover, educators must identify and engage these students at ages much younger than 16 with creative and nontraditional strategies to enable these students to become successful. We must create professional development opportunities to train teachers to more effectively engage the increasingly diverse students which are withdrawing from the traditional high school.

CHRONICALLY DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

One subset of students that leaves school early is those who are chronically disruptive and leave either by choice or by invitation. The potential benefits to students who would otherwise drop out of Maryland public schools by requiring them to attend beyond the age of 16 must be weighed against the potential detriment to their peers in cases of highly disruptive students. However, with appropriate professional development training, perhaps some of these chronically disruptive students could be better managed within the traditional classroom setting. Appropriate alternative programming could be the remedy for those who can't be managed within the regular classroom setting.

GED IS AN EXISTING ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO A DIPLOMA

The General Educational Development (GED) Program offers students an alternative route to earning a high school diploma. In FY 2007, 5,720 GEDs were awarded in Maryland (Maryland State Department of Education, 2007). Although students who are awarded a high school diploma through the GED Tests are eligible to attend community colleges, those students are not considered high school completers under No Child Left Behind. A recipient who earns a High School

“Contrary to popular belief, most dropouts demonstrate remarkable persistence and drive to achieve their education goals. In search of a second chance, they find and enter a wide variety of “second chance” programs in pursuit of a high school credential.”

—Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts, Double the Numbers, a Jobs for the Future Initiative.

Diploma by Assessment is nevertheless deemed a high school dropout. As a result, this viable alternative is not counted as a positive educational outcome for local school systems.

THOUGHTS ON SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Students with disabilities receive special education and related services designed specifically to meet their unique needs. These services and specialized instruction are provided to the student at no cost to the parents. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) is the federal law mandating that all children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 are entitled to a free appropriate public education, sometimes referred to as FAPE. Additionally, the Annotated Code of Maryland, §7-701, mandates that all individuals 5 years or older and under 21 shall be admitted, free of charge, to the public schools of Maryland.

Another special student population is that of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. These students have a primary or home language other than English, and have been assessed as having no ability, or limited ability, to understand, speak, read, or write English. LEP students are also entitled to a public education between the ages of 3 and 21 (COMAR 13A.01.04.02 (11)). Some research and data indicate, however, that being entitled to FAPE until age 21 does not necessarily result in a higher rate of school completion for these special populations.

To meet the needs of these diverse subgroups of students, appropriate educational program options, services, and supports are necessary. As the discussion of raising the compulsory attendance age continues, policymakers and educators must be sure to consider the unique needs and concerns of these students.

NEXT STEPS

This Task Force urges consideration of this report in concert with the work of other groups that have been convened to address ways for students to achieve, including Maryland's Parent Advisory Council, the Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African-American Males, and the Task Force on Universal Preschool Education. The research and recommendations of these other groups, coupled with this Task Force's work: (1) elucidate the complexities impacting student success; and (2) underscore the importance of identification and early intervention with students who are at risk for dropping out or otherwise failing to realize their academic potential and potential to become successful community members. Additionally, creating partnerships with local business leaders and workforce development organizations will enable local school systems to create and tailor educational programming to meet the workforce needs of their local communities. Further, this will engage the business community in education.

We must identify students at risk for dropping out at very early ages; create and make accessible sustained interventions to prevent them from dropping out; encourage and provide alternative routes to success for those students who ultimately drop out notwithstanding all

efforts; provide professional development; and allocate the resources, both financial and otherwise, to ensure that all Maryland students maximize their educational potential.

Recommendations

The Task Force believes that Maryland must do more to engage children and keep them in school. However, the Task Force agrees that in isolation, a change in the compulsory attendance age will not reduce the dropout rate. The reality is a policy change can require students to attend school, but it can't make them learn. Whether the students benefit from being in school depends largely upon the programs and support they receive there. Accordingly, the Task Force supports the implementation of these recommendations, and the engagement of students at an earlier age, in order to address the needs of children at risk of dropping out of school. In the context of strengthened, expanded supports for the students who would be affected, students who would otherwise drop out, would, of their own volition, choose to remain in school and earn a diploma. Thereby, addressing the issue of legally mandating students to remain in school would become unnecessary.

Recommendation One

Establish a statewide initiative that will:

- a) Be flexible while maintaining a consistent approach to meeting the needs of 16- to - 18 year old dropouts and potential dropouts, regardless of where they live or attended school;
- b) Expand the data collection work on existing dropout-prevention and re-entry programs that has been done, and design and implement a program to analyze the effectiveness of these dropout-prevention programs;
- c) Establish pilot model programs based on proven or promising approaches, and evaluate their success prior to statewide implementation. (Consideration should be given to geographic location, size, and diversity of school systems.);
- d) Provide an infrastructure (people, organization, time of day, location, resources, community and family involvement), and identify reallocation of funding and new funding that guarantee effective interagency services and assure increased numbers of students will stay in school and graduate; and,
- e) Examine articulation and funding agreements and formulas among agencies and institutions to determine which of these enhance students' opportunities and which serve as barriers.

Rationale

If the compulsory attendance age is raised, Maryland will immediately need to put in place a system of supports and services for students who under the previous requirement would have dropped out, and for those young adults who have already dropped out but will be required to return to school. A statewide framework must be built to accommodate these students; this multi-faceted recommendation can serve as the blueprint.

Before Maryland puts dropout prevention and intervention programs and practices in place, devoting staff, resources, and time, we must know that these programs and practices will be effective.

Task Force research on current practices and programs included collecting data from school systems on existing programs. Members analyzed the evidence shared by districts, and examined the findings of national longitudinal dropout studies. This process revealed weaknesses in data collected on programs across the state. Task Force findings in this area included the following:

- There is a significant discrepancy among districts in what is identified as an alternative education or dropout-prevention program.
- The data evaluating these programs are inconsistent.
- It is difficult, if not impossible, to compare the costs per student of these programs.

Better data collection is essential to confirming programs' success before statewide implementation. It is also essential for reasons of accountability. Although there are programs that address at-risk students, there have been limited studies done on the effectiveness of these programs. This lack of robust data has inhibited the Task Force from making more specific recommendations regarding the designs of ideal dropout-prevention and re-entry programs. Scant data has also constrained this Task Force's analysis of the need for alternative programming, the additional years to educate students, and the associated costs. Before moving forward with costly initiatives, it is imperative that evidence-based decisions be made that support both the need for change, as well as the justification for funding.

A review of promising practices in other states indicated a significant expense (around \$200 million dollars per year) to simply raise the compulsory age requirement to 18 under the present school environment and current instructional delivery systems. The additional expenses associated with truly alternative programs—over and above the school systems' commitment to the typical child served—should be based on research that has taken place in Maryland, with Maryland children, ideally in multiple settings. The analysis of these pilot programs would then

inform further discussion of the fiscal support needed for an alternative program to meet the needs of Maryland’s students, teachers, businesses, and families.

Recommendation Two

Support and promote the awarding of a High School Diploma by Assessment as a valid credential, and work with the federal government to remove any disincentives for recognizing a high school diploma earned by passing the national GED Tests.

Rationale

The traditional route to the diploma must remain the preferred pathway. However, Maryland must acknowledge that the traditional, four-year high school experience is an unrealistic expectation for some children. Alternatives, including the awarding of a High School Diploma by Assessment through the GED Tests, must be provided, supported, and promoted. Maryland must support and promote alternative pathways for those students for whom it is appropriate. Certainly, these pathways should not be promoted to every child at risk of dropping out.

INCREASE ACCESS TO GED INSTRUCTION AND TESTING

GED instructional programs should be more effectively publicized and more widely available. Schools should be encouraged to distribute accurate information about local GED instructional programs, including the cost of testing, both to students who have already dropped out of school and to students at risk of dropping out. Students also need to know that a High School Diploma by Assessment is a valid credential to enter Maryland community colleges. They also need to know that without a college degree their future income potential is limited compared to that of a college graduate. One opportunity for providing this information is the exit interview that COMAR requires of all students who withdraw from Maryland public schools. In order to implement this recommendation, instructional programs and testing services would need to be expanded. For example, demand for GED instruction exceeds current capacity.

IMPLEMENT THE “GED OPTION” PROGRAM

Maryland students wishing to attempt the GED Tests must first drop out of school to conform to the American Council on Education (ACE) requirement. ACE does offer an alternative for targeted students who remain in school. The GED Option program targets students who are able to complete high school requirements, but who, for a variety of circumstances, are behind in the credits needed to graduate with their class. With the GED Option, the student remains enrolled and attends high school for at least 15 hours of instruction per week. This

instruction includes not only GED preparation, but also workforce development skills and/or career and technology education. As the GED Tests are a valid method of earning a diploma, Maryland should consider implementing the GED Option program, which has been adopted in 11 states, including New York and Virginia. To implement a similar GED Option in Maryland, the State Board of Education would need to amend COMAR to recognize the GED Option program as an approved pathway leading to a Maryland high school diploma.

REMOVE DISINCENTIVES

The GED Tests are a valid route to the diploma and should be promoted as such, regardless of how the federal government categorizes GED Tests under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Currently, NCLB requires Maryland to count its graduates with a High School Diploma by Assessment as dropouts. As a result, these students negatively affect the school, school system, and state graduation rates, which are used in the determination of Adequate Yearly Progress. There is much at stake here for schools and school systems. Those not making Adequate Yearly Progress are subject to a series of escalating consequences that include corrective actions and complete restructuring of the school or school system. It is easy to see why a school or school system might not promote the GED program as positively or as often as it should. This is a damaging disincentive to meeting students' needs, and it must be eliminated. This Task Force urges the Maryland Congressional delegation to work with the Congress and the President to amend No Child Left Behind to allow students who earn a GED to be counted as high school graduates. Implementing this recommendation would increase Maryland's high school graduates by five percent (based on FY 2006 data).

CHOOSE DIPLOMA PATHS INDIVIDUALLY

Identifying the GED Tests as the most appropriate path for a student to earn a diploma must be done with careful consideration for each student. However, the GED Tests are not appropriate or attainable for every child. Some students, including some English Language Learners and some students with special needs, would not be successful on the GED Tests. Together, parents, school personnel, and the student must review the student's skills, needs, and future goals against all of the diploma routes and choose the best one for the student.

Recommendation Three

Create multiple pathways to the Maryland High School Diploma for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. These diploma pathways should include these options: work study beginning in grade 9; a five-year high school program; and instruction at times outside of the traditional school schedule.

Rationale

Raising the compulsory attendance age alone will not produce more high school graduates. Indeed, whether the compulsory attendance age is raised or not, other actions and new alternatives to help students complete a path to graduation are needed. Particularly in need of alternatives to traditional high school programs are students with disabilities and students with little or no English language skills, referred to as English Language Learners.

Flexible, alternative routes to the Maryland High School Diploma will provide these students additional opportunities to be successful. Allowing five-year high school programs, for example, will allow more time for remediation for students having difficulty passing the High School Assessments. The additional time may also be used to meet the requirements for a Maryland High School Diploma. Another consideration in creating these diploma pathways is the age of English Language Learners at the time of enrollment. For example, an English Language Learner may enroll in high school at age 17 speaking no English. To be successful, some students may need to be enrolled for a period of time past age 18.

An alternative route to the Maryland High School Diploma that offers instruction outside of the traditional school schedule is also essential. It is not unusual for some families to place obligations (e.g., working to support the family or supervising siblings) on students that make it difficult for the students to fully participate in school. A flexible schedule with opportunities for learning in the evening, on the weekend, or during the summer would allow these students to attend school while still fulfilling their familial responsibilities.

Based on student feedback on a Maryland school district survey (Cecil County Public Schools, 2007), a five-year high school program could address the special needs of students at risk by providing:

- Additional help in academic subjects;
- Work-study opportunities that can be built into student schedules beginning at an earlier age; and,
- Additional time to meet graduation requirements, including the High School Assessments.

Alternate formats and creative solutions for instruction may enable students to complete their education. For example, school schedules may use part-time day classes; combine part-time day classes with night school; and/or include work study and technical post-secondary education.

Recommendation Four

The State Board of Education must adopt a definition of alternative education that addresses different modes of instruction and appropriate strategies for current dropouts and for children and young adults at risk of dropping out.

Rationale

Unlike several other states, Maryland has no formal definition of alternative education. This omission must be addressed promptly. Adopting a formal definition in state regulations is necessary: to ensure that alternative education programs deliver instruction that meets content standards; to offer appropriate, targeted courses that enable students to reintegrate into a comprehensive school when ready; to address individual learning styles of students; and generally to meet standards for education as set forth by the Maryland State Board of Education. The Task Force must emphasize that flexible schedules should be considered for these programs to meet the needs of students with personal obligations such as job responsibilities and other family obligations.

A review of the literature and current practices for alternative education programs across the nation revealed common types of program locations and common elements of quality practice and programming, summarized below.

Alternative Education Program Locations

- Separate room or teacher within a comprehensive high school where additional services are provided
- School within a comprehensive high school
- Separate facility

(Source: State of Wisconsin, Department of Public Instruction)

Elements of Quality Practice and Programming

- Low student/teacher ratio
- Accredited
- Authority to grant credentials (High School Diplomas or GED)

- Credit recovery (allowing students the opportunity to make up credits that were lost due to failure)
- Certified teachers
- Flexible scheduling
- Strong relationships with the district office and other high schools
- Private funding and/or public-private partnerships

(Source: State of Wisconsin, Department of Public Instruction)

To support students, alternative education models need to offer a range of services and instruction, including anger management; small group instruction; some individualized instruction; computerized, self-paced instruction; guidance services; and study skills. Strong, consistent and persistent support services are critical to students' success.

In crafting a regulatory definition for alternative programs, the State Board of Education should consider the aforementioned program locations, elements of quality practice and programming, and range of services and instruction. Also important to the process is encouraging and considering the input of stakeholders, such as local school systems, higher education, community organizations, experts in alternative programs, parents, and students.

During the process of developing the alternative program definition, the State Board of Education and/or Maryland State Department of Education should also work to change perceptions of alternative programs. Too often, alternative education programs carry a reputation in their respective communities as programs for “bad kids.” This view must be changed as an alternative program infrastructure is put into place. While these programs do serve some students with behavioral problems, they also serve many other students who do not have behavior issues but do require an alternative educational setting in order to be successful. Alternative programs have great potential for helping children achieve success; communities must understand this so they can get involved with and support the school and its students.

Recommendation Five

Should the compulsory age of attendance be raised to 18, Maryland should provide the adequate financial support to raise the age of compulsory attendance to age 18.

Rationale

This Task Force has identified many, but not all, of the costs that would be associated with an increase in the compulsory attendance age. Raising the compulsory attendance age can be done responsibly and effectively only by providing the resources necessary to engage all students at a young age and keep them engaged until they successfully complete high school.

While it is not the job of this Task Force to identify specific funding sources necessary to support an increase in the compulsory attendance age, or otherwise implement these recommendations, students will not benefit from an unfunded mandate. The subcommittee recognized that much more than an infusion of money would be necessary to effect this legislated change should it come to fruition. Preparation time would need to be built into the implementation date to allow systems to hire and professionally develop additional teachers, build additional classrooms, purchase and outfit relocatable classrooms, order needed textbooks and supplies, redraw school boundaries, analyze transportation needs, account for the special needs of the physically and educationally disabled students returning or remaining, and include the appropriate amount of money in the local school boards' funding requests to the local political jurisdictions in time to meet all of the deadlines for adequate consideration in the budgetary process. Public-private partnerships may need to be explored as the State and local school systems attempt to marshal sufficient resources to implement any changes to the compulsory age of attendance.

Recommendation Six

Appoint a group to study Maryland's existing truancy courts, examine their structure, assess their effectiveness, and, if appropriate, make a recommendation for expanding truancy courts statewide.

Rationale

Currently, Maryland lacks an established system of support and consequences for frequently truant students. And while Maryland has established consequences for parents/guardians, they are rarely enforced. Without enforcement in place, the compulsory attendance law is insignificant, and raising the compulsory attendance age will have little or no influence on keeping students in school. Therefore, the State should consider a truancy court system in each county to instill hope, improve student attendance, enhance achievement, and reduce delinquent behavior through a proactive partnership of schools, courts, and families.

Truancy courts currently exist in several Maryland counties, but data on their effectiveness is not known. Truancy courts have been used with strong success in several states, including North Carolina, where a newly developed truancy court has successfully transformed truant elementary and middle school students in two counties into perfect or nearly perfect attendance students. According to Judge Richard Chaney of Durham, North Carolina, only one student failed to graduate high school out of the students who regularly came into his courtroom. In St. Louis County, Missouri, a three-year evaluation of the truancy court showed 60 percent of students significantly improved their attendance rates, reducing absences by an average of 44

percent (St. Louis County Truancy Court, 2005). Additionally, in Ingham County, Michigan, approximately 63 percent of the 600 students referred to truancy court in the first two years have improved their attendance (Burton, 2003). Dramatic successes have also been found in Delaware. In 2003, 55 percent of the 739 students with cases closed achieved overall compliance with the truancy court; 94 percent of the students achieving full compliance remained in school at the end of the year; 70 percent of all students were still in school at the end of the year; and, 66 percent of all 2002 students involved with the truancy court continued to remain in school more than a year later (State of Delaware Justice of the Peace Court, 2003).

Should truancy courts be established, Maryland should consider a system whereby each truancy court works closely with the local State's Attorneys office, Sheriff's department, Department of Social Services, local leaders, and local boards of education to ensure compliance with compulsory attendance laws.

A statewide truancy court system should consider targeting students who were absent between 10 and 30 times. One judge, volunteer or appointed, per court could handle truancy cases once a week before or after school. The truancy judge would review a student's attendance, behavior, and academic performance. After an accumulation of multiple absences, the student would be placed on probation. If there is no improvement, the student might face community service, juvenile detention, or parental supervision in school.

The court would also intervene with issues underlying a student's truancy, including depression and drug and/or alcohol abuse, and make the appropriate referrals and placements.

Suggestions for keeping students in school through the truancy court system include transportation assistance; parent participation; counseling; parenting classes; support groups; and positive reinforcement, such as praise for small accomplishments and rewards for attendance and compliance with the truancy system.

Appendix D: Summary of MCPS Formative Assessments of Alternative I, II, and III Programs¹

MCPS has not conducted a summative evaluation of its Alternative I, II, and III programs to discern the impact of these programs on high school graduation rates or other outcomes of interest. Yet, according to the Office of Shared Accountability, MCPS has conducted two formative evaluations of its alternative programs to provide recommendations for improving program effectiveness. This appendix summarizes the information that MCPS provided to OLO regarding these efforts. These formative evaluations have neither been published nor shared with the MCPS Board of Education. Nor have these evaluations been shared with OLO.

Overview: MCPS staff notes a major challenge in conducting summative evaluations is the use of random assignments to empirically identify the actual impact of programs. Randomized evaluations often are not feasible in educational settings due to ethical, practical, and logistic issues. As a result, robust evaluation studies of alternative programs—studies that can claim a causal link between program activity and student outcomes—are rare or nonexistent. Given the challenges in conducting summative evaluations, MCPS has conducted two formative studies of its alternative programs to provide information for managers on program implementation and improvement.

Study 1: Formative Evaluation of Alternative II and III Programs (FY 2010)

This evaluation examined the extent to which Alternative II and III programs were being implemented as intended, based on program documentation as well as from interviews, observations, and surveys. Schools where large numbers of students had returned from an alternative program were included in this study; the extent to which the programs met the needs of students for short-term intervention and whether they were able to exit the program were also examined.² MCPS states that as a result of their evaluation, changes to staffing, program oversight structure, and data management were made.

Study 2: Formative Evaluation of Alternative I Program (FY 2011)

This evaluation examined the extent to which the Alternative I program is being implemented as intended, based on documentation and guidance provided to schools by the central office and from interviews, observations and surveys conducted in three high school-middle school pairs within common clusters (six schools). The Office of Shared Accountability also analyzed school system information for all students in an Alternative I program during the FY 2011 school year, the extent to which the program meet the support needs of students, and how well the Alternative I program functions in relation to Alternative II and III programs. It is unclear whether any changes to the Alternative I program resulted from this formative evaluation.

¹ The Office of Legislative Oversight prepared this appendix based on information that was relayed from MCPS but not verified by the OLO.

² MCPS notes that while it was not an outcome study, findings from this report included the short-term outcomes for students in the programs, including the numbers who graduated, returned to a neighborhood school, and so forth. In general, students enrolled in a program for those with serious disciplinary infractions (Alternative III) were able to exit relatively quickly and return to school or graduate. Alternative II students, with a more complex and interrelated set of academic, attendance, behavioral, and social issues, were less likely to be ready to exit the program at the end of the school year.